

the chronicle

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CHRISTMAS TO
LOCAL ESTATE**
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Problem loo block in park to be levelled

A derelict toilet block which has been targeted by vandals is to be pulled down in a Walsall park this month in a bid to cut anti-social behaviour.

The removal of the building from Kings Hill park in Darlaston is part of a long-term five year plan to spruce up the area.

Obscene graffiti has regularly been sprayed on the toilets and mess room with the Friends of Darlaston South Parks taking to painting it over themselves. The £20,000 demolition project is to start on December 13.

The work is expected to be completed by Christmas – weather permitting. Paths around the disused toilet block will also be removed along with shrubs and hedges around the block.

It is one of steps to reduce crime, with other problems on the green being caused by mini-motos and quad bikes.

Walsall Council's Greenspaces team and the Friends are working together on the package of improvements.

Shrub removal and enhancement works are being undertaken in mid-January to help promote natural surveillance and security, which is being funded through S106 developer contribution from the TRW site.

Almost £200,000 has been allocated for a series of landscape and security improvements. There are also plans to buy a covered youth shelter next year. Last year £40,000 was secured to fund footpath improvement work, new fencing, signage and the creation of a picnic area.

Leisure chief councillor Anthony Harris, said: "We're asking residents and members of the wider community who enjoy Kings Hill Park to bear with us while the demolition work takes place over the coming weeks and months."

Schools close due to weather

Schools have been closed as heating and toilets broke down in another day of chaos caused by the weather.

Millfields Nursery School in Lichfield Road, Bloxwich, was closed because of heating problems.

The Church of England Primary School of St Edmund and St John in Dudley was also closed today due to heating difficulties, while the Dormston School in Sedgley was opening for years eight and 10 from 8.45am-12.35pm only.

Hillcrest School and Community College in Netherton was shut and engineers were working on the heating.

Netherbrook Primary School was closed because of an electricity problem.

The Dell Stadium in Brierley Hill was shut because pitches were frozen.

The walk-in health centre in Dudley has been "extremely busy" over the last few days, health chiefs said. The onset of colds and people falling on ice has led to a surge in people using the facility at Holly Hall.

Sarah Dugan, chief executive of NHS Dudley, said: "Winter is always a busier period for the NHS but over the past week with the freezing conditions our services are seeing an increase in people needing care."

Calls to home emergency experts HomeServe are "snowballing" in Walsall as a result of the severe weather.

Oldest dad's wife investigated after media coverage

MARRIAGE NEWS LED TO CHARGES

walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

The 26-year-old wife of Britain's oldest dad of twins cheated nearly £7,000 of taxpayers' money after failing to tell authorities she had married her 72-year-old husband.

Lisa Roden, of Brownhills, hit the headlines after having twins by father-of-12 Richard Roden, who is 46 years her senior, in January 2009.

The news reports brought the Rodens' marriage to the attention of Walsall Council and the Department for Work and Pensions, who had been shelling out council tax benefit and income support to someone they believed was a single mother.

Roden appeared at Walsall Magistrates Court this week facing two charges of failing to notify authorities of a change in circumstances after she was overpaid a total of £6,901.58 between February 2009 and January 2010.

The 26-year-old, of Peake Crescent, who is eight months pregnant with the couple's third child, admitted both charges and said she had sent off letters to both authorities when she married ex-welder Mr Roden in September 2009, but the letters must not have arrived.

Miss Catherine McTighe, prosecuting, said: "This came to the attention of the national media on the first birthday of the twins."

"She was interviewed under caution, she admitted that she had married in September 2009 and there had been two children born."

"She considered she had lived with Mr Roden since the twins were born."

Roden, who had been paid the benefits as a single parent from a previous relationship since June 2002, said she had started to repay her council tax benefit five months ago.

She was ordered to pay a £50 fine for each offence, £100 costs and a £15 victim surcharge. Roden said after the hearing: "I wrote letters, it's not my fault they never arrived."

Richard Roden will become a father of 13 when the new arrival is born, which is expected at the end of January. He has 10 other children from two previous marriages. Lisa has a daughter, Bethany, now nine, from a previous relationship.



Lisa Roden at court

Nursing a record ambition



Physiotherapist Kevin Harvey from Acorns Hospice, Walsall, who is in training to beat the world record for running dressed as a nurse.

A physiotherapist is hoping to give a Walsall charity's fundraising exploits a shot in the arm by claiming a peculiar world record at next year's London Marathon.

Kevin Harvey, who works at Acorns Children's Hospice on Walsall Road, plans to run the famous race dressed in a nurse's outfit.

A veteran of six marathons, Kevin needs to beat three hours and 46 minutes if he's to eclipse the current Guinness world record, held by

Andrew White. The race takes place on April 17 2011 and Kevin is already in training for the big day. "Training for the Marathon in April is hard," Kevin said. "I'll be running for hours through dark winter evenings. But that is tiny when compared to the reality of the lives of the families who use Acorns' services and the challenges they face."

To sponsor Kevin visit www.justgiving.com/nurseymarathon

Church is plagued by metal thefts

A church has been hit by metal thieves three times in as many months, leaving members to fork out hundreds of pounds in repairs. New Invention Methodist Church had to spend £600 on roof repairs.

Lead was plundered from the main hall and storage buildings in the grounds.

In the latest theft last month, members had to spend £285 from the Willenhall church's reserves to replace the missing lead with special flashing material.

Church member Brian Cadman said: "We could do without the lead thefts because we are a small, self-sufficient church, and we can't afford these repair bills. There have been a lot of these thefts in the New Invention area."

The costly repairs have come at a bad time for the Lichfield Road church as it is trying to raise £5,000 for a new central heating system.

Church members launched the fundraising drive to replace the current ageing system, which was installed when the hall was rebuilt 20 years ago following an arson attack.

A recent fundraising gift day at the site raised more than £2,300 in two hours towards the cause.

Wellwishers donated a total of £2,337 at a gift day and coffee morning on November 20 in aid of the new boiler for the annexe which is used for Sunday School, Boys and Girls Brigade meetings, a yoga club, table tennis group and a senior citizens' luncheon club.

Meanwhile, a Christmas fair on November 26 raised £924 – the highest in recent years from the annual event. This sum will be put towards the roof repairs and general running costs at the site.

Mr Cadman said the congregation had been overwhelmed by the support given.

Cold is costing local business

West Midlands companies have been losing nearly £73 million a day as the freezing conditions lead to cancelled trains, airport shut-downs and road closures, according to a new report.

A survey of companies by the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce Group found 39 per cent of its members said the bad weather was having a negative impact on their businesses.

Rees Gurdin, policy adviser at the chamber, said: "The last spell of snow and ice in January this year cost 52.9 per cent of chamber members as much as £10,000 each."

"It is estimated the current bad weather could cost the West Midlands £72.7m per day."

The latest survey showed businesses were losing money because 63 per cent of staff were absent and 56 per cent were late for work.

Half of the companies quizzed in the survey had to increase heating which had increased costs, while 32 per cent had lost business through late deliveries.

Sixty one per cent of businesses have said that technology was helping cope with some of the problems, with people using conference calling or being able to work from home.

The chamber said companies it had surveyed were now calling on the Government to keep transport moving as much as possible, to invest in British manufactured equipment to clear snow and to invest in more stock piles of grit.

The survey also called for better, more resilient, public transport.

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Fish face threat of freezing

Fish are dying and thousands more are at risk after a fishing pool in Willenhall froze over during the cold spell.

Carp and other breeds have been seen floating on the surface of the fishing pool at Willenhall Memorial Park. It's believed plummeting temperatures have created a thick layer of ice on top of the pool, leaving fish starved of oxygen in the shallow waters. Mini-diggers have been taken on to smash through the ice and help the fish to breathe.

Park chiefs have sought advice from the Environment Agency and will review the pool this week to see if they need to install an oxygen pump to save the fish.

It comes amid warnings that the freezing temperatures, which last week dipped as low as -12C (10F), could continue this week.

It has been suggested by anglers who use the pool that up to 5,000 fish, worth around £20,000, are at risk.

Councillor Carl Creaney, representative for Willenhall South, said: "We could lose the entire fish stock because of the cold weather."

"We are talking about around 5,000 fish."

"Looking after these fish is a complex operation because you cannot just up and move them due to the dangers of contaminating other pools."

The pool has undergone more than £125,000 of repairs after subsidence made it difficult for disabled fishermen to cast a line there.

Village ready for festivities

Festivities in Aldridge will be aiming to get villagers into the Christmas spirit.

The event this Saturday will include carol singing, a visit from Father Christmas and stars from the village pantomime and will run between 10am and 3pm at Aldridge Shopping Centre off Anchor Road.

It has been organised by Aldridge Village Business Partnership and Walsall Council's district centre management team.

Choirs from Cooper & Jordan Primary School, Leighwood Primary School, St Mary of the Angels Catholic Primary School, CHB Performing Arts and Aldridge Parish Church will entertain visitors with seasonal songs. Characters from Aldridge Youth Theatre's Sleeping Beauty pantomime will also be out and about in the village.

Aim for Olympics

Pupils at a Walsall school have passed a first aid qualification – and now have their sights set on volunteering for the 2012 Olympics.

Around 30 A-level students at Alunwell Business and Enterprise College, Primley Avenue took part in a day-long course. They hope the extra qualification will be a boost to their CVs.

The Year 12 pupils, who are aged 16 and 17, are now waiting to see if their Olympic volunteer applications will be successful.

Backseat baby Lacey just wouldn't wait



Lacey-Rae Duckhouse with proud mum, Claire Duckhouse and her sister, Jackie Duckhouse.

Little Lacey-Rae Duckhouse had a dramatic entrance into the world – she was delivered by her aunt in the back of her grandfather's car as he raced to the hospital.

Her mother Claire went into labour three weeks early and was rushed to Walsall Manor Hospital in her father Christopher's car along with sister Jackie, aged 25.

But six minutes into the journey from Rutherford Road, Beechdale, Lacey started to make an appearance.

Jackie leapt into the back seat and moments later delivered the baby as welder Christopher, 52, continued through the traffic to the hospital.

Mother-of-one Jackie, of Darwin Road, Beechdale, said, although terrifying, it had been the "best experience ever".

"I was sat in the front seat of the car and my sister was saying the head's out so I climbed over to get to her," she said.

Scared

"I was scared because I didn't know what to do but I just thought 'I've got to get stuck in'. It was the best experience ever."

"All that fear went away. I was glad there were no complications. When we got to the hospital the baby was still attached to my sister so the

nurses had to bring her in and cut the cord." Claire, 28, said: "It all happened so fast. It was all over after six minutes. I was really shocked."

"I thought I would have made it to the hospital."

"When we got to the hospital the midwife said my sister had done a good job."

Lacey-Rae weighed in at 6lbs 3oz at the hospital last Saturday.

Claire, who lives with her partner and father of Lacey-Rae, Christopher Brannigan, 27, has two other children Ryan, 11, and Isabelle, four.

She added: "She's settling in really well."

Pubs and off-licences facing £20,000 fines

Pubs, clubs and off-licences in Walsall which sell booze to anyone under the legal age face fines of £20,000 under tough new laws being called for by council chiefs. The current penalty is £10,000.

Trouble spots need stricter rules and regulations and harsher punishments, the council's safety boss said. Licensing chiefs at the council want to see laws brought in that will enable them to hand out bigger fines to anyone caught selling alcohol to underage customers.

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Director is named

The new non-executive director of Walsall Manor Hospital has been announced as Dr Phil Begg.

Dr Begg has been appointed following the departure of Sue James, and is associate dean at the School of Health and Wellbeing at the University of Wolverhampton. He is also chairman of NHS Walsall Community Health.

He said: "I am delighted to be joining the board of the Manor Hospital at this really exciting time, the NHS is undergoing one of the most comprehensive transformations since its start in 1948, and to be part of this is a privilege."

"I hope that in bringing my experience as a clinician, educator and strategic manager will add something helpful."

He is also a visiting professor of clinical sciences at the University of Kentucky in the USA, and honorary senior lecturer at the University of Birmingham Medical School.

Museum adds extra dine date

Christmas dinner bookings at Walsall Leather Museum have been so popular that an extra date has been added.

The dinners which are available at the Littleton Street West museum at 12.30pm on December 10 and December 16, but will now also be available on December 20.

The two-course meals, at £8.50 each, will be served at the Saddle Room cafe. For more information or to book, call 07535 128926.

Roping in the charity cash



Pupils Bethany Haddon, Paramdeep Kaur, Manvir Jhutti, Eleanor Potts, and Chelsea Russell, all aged 12.

Hundreds of children at a Willenhall school raised more than £1,000 for charity with a sponsored skipping event.

The 220 pupils at Pool Hayes School, Castle Drive, got into groups of six and each one continuously skipped with a jump rope for an hour in aid of the British Heart Foundation.

PE teacher Adele Sarginson said

the event was the school's second annual fundraiser for the charity, and was part of its "cross-curricular" week where more than one department worked together.

On the same day the Year Eight children did the sponsored skip, they also had a session in the science lab where they dissected a lamb's heart and learnt about how to keep their own hearts healthy.

Town's Tesco is opened

It has taken eight months of work and cost £55 million and now Walsall's Tesco Extra supermarket has finally opened.

Shoppers flocked to check out the store at the heart of the town centre. Council chiefs welcomed the store, which has created 230 jobs, as a "fantastic employment opportunity", while shoppers today gave it a big thumbs up.

Grandmother-of-10 Jane Hawkins was among the first shoppers through the doors and described it as "lovely".

"It's really big and I only had a quick look around it this morning. But I'm going to come back and have a look at everything properly later on. "I think it will be brilliant for Walsall as it means people can come here and get everything they want," added the 51-year-old support worker for the Society for the Blind.

Council leader Mike Bird welcomed the store but warned they must be aware of the implications for the rest of the town.

"I think it's a fantastic employment opportunity," said Councillor Bird. "It is a huge store with 750 car parking spaces. We have to be aware of the implications that that may have for the town centre."

"But this is a good news story, it's a huge store and the creation of employment in the town must be celebrated."

Food service to be reduced

A canteen service for hundreds of Walsall Council workers faces being scaled back following the move to a new depot.

Council chiefs are looking to save £108,000 over the next three years which could impact on the hot meals service offered to staff. A "reduced provision of canteen facility" is being proposed by the authority when street cleaning staff relocate to the depot in Pelsall Road. Around 400 workers will move to the old Wagon Automotive factory site.

Bosses have insisted they are looking at how hot food can be provided. The town's transport chief has admitted staff are not expected to be on site a lot of the time.

Councillor Tom Ansell said: "Most people who are going to be at the depot are going to be out and about most of the time. We want people out and about." There is a canteen at the council depot in Norfolk Place, Leamore.

Drink driver is handed a ban

A drink-driver from Brownhills who was over the legal limit has been banned from the road for 12 months.

Roger Fletcher, aged 60, was breathalysed on Silver Street on November 19 and recorded 52 micrograms of alcohol in 100 millilitres of breath, the limit is 35.

The 60-year-old, of Shannon Drive, pleaded guilty at Walsall Magistrates Court. He was fined £250 and ordered to pay £85 costs and £15 victim surcharge.

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Mansions is bid rejected

A scheme to convert a Walsall pub into one of the borough's biggest homes and build four £1 million mansions nearby has been thrown out.

The proposed revamp of the former Three Crowns pub in Sutton Road was turned down by Walsall Council planners after it was judged as an inappropriate development in the green belt.

Revised plans involved a

luxury home with indoor swimming pool, six bedrooms, five bathrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen and gym. Four other six-bedroom homes worth about £1m each were planned alongside the 1930s building which closed as a pub more than three years ago.

Mike Lapworth, speaking on behalf of the applicants Lapworth Partnership, said it was a

good use for the site and a way to retain a landmark building.

St Matthew's Councillor Mohammed Arif also spoke in favour of the proposal.

He said: "I would rather see a high quality development there than apartments." But more than 30 complaints were registered with the council relating to over-development, loss of green belt and lack of consultation.

Jobs hope for home

More than 40 jobs could be created after plans to build a new 50-bedroom care home on a former Walsall pub site were given the go-ahead.

The accommodation block for old people is to be built on land off the old Swan and Cues on the corner of Harden Road after Walsall Council planning chiefs approved the application.

Ideal Care Homes will build a three-storey residential block at the

junction of Coalpool Lane. The application submitted by Phil Brock, on behalf of LNT Construction, said: "At this stage, it is estimated the 50-bed care home proposed would provide for between 38 and 48 jobs.

"This represents the total employment generation and not the number of staff present on site at any one time.

Councillor Mike Bird said: "It was a terrible old pub. The scheme will provide jobs in the area."

Lack of sites puts future jobs at risk

Future job opportunities in Walsall may be at risk after a new regeneration study found the borough lacks suitable sites for industrial development. The findings are due to be discussed by councillors.

Walsall is involved in the creation of a new joint core strategy with its neighbours to work together on key issues such as retail, house building and employment. The resource-sharing project with Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley has already saved the councils £1 million.

This was done by combining legal and staff costs to convert the ideas into policy. But key findings for Walsall include the shortage of suitable land for potential employers to move to. A planning inspection report will be discussed.

The report stated: "Walsall has a shortfall of vacant readily available land for industrial investment. It will therefore be very important to ensure that good quality employment land, whether vacant or occupied, is not lost to other users.

"Otherwise investment and jobs could be adversely affected in future, harming the borough's regeneration prospects. If the required land is not brought forward in sufficient quantities the inspectors consider there may be a need to be a full review of the plan."

It further stated there was a clear short-term need for land for both smaller and larger businesses.

Other findings include a new cinema was a priority for Walsall town centre and should be the focus for more office development.

The report also recommended the land near York's Bridge, Norton Road, Pelsall be identified as a site for fire clay extraction. The Black Country Joint Core Strategy has been put together to shape the future of the region up to 2026.

Markets enjoying a boom

Markets across the region are enjoying a boom as shoppers hunt for Christmas bargains.

Traders say they have been boosted by a surge in customers as many are forced to watch every penny.

Markets such as Bescot at Banks's Stadium, Walsall, and the newly-re-launched pitch at Brownhills have experienced a rise recently.

Dermot McGillicuddy, of LSD Promotions which runs Bescot and Brownhills markets said there was a marked rise in shoppers.

"There has certainly been an upsurge," he said.

"With it being Christmas times are tight and people are being very careful what they spend."

"Markets are known to give really good value and traders themselves are finding it hard and are selling cheaper because they have to."

"The last couple of weeks Bescot has been very good and Brownhills is still a full market."

"Things are going better than expected in the current economic conditions which are very tough."

Ban was breached

A supporter who breached his football banning order by going to a Walsall FC game has been hit with a £200 bill.

Michael Jarvis was spotted at the FA Cup first round replay with Fleetwood Town at the Banks's Stadium on November 16. The 51-year-old from Blackpool was banned from all football games for three years in 2009. He was seen by police and arrested.

He pleaded guilty at Walsall Magistrates Court to failing to comply with the order.

He was fined £100 with £100 in costs.

Gang sent to prison over £17m VAT fraud



Harbinder Singh Samra

Five gang members, including a man shot by a mystery gunman outside a pub in Walsall, have been locked up for stealing £17 million in a sophisticated VAT fraud.

The gang was led by Harbinder Singh Samra, who was shot four times getting into his £250,000 Rolls Royce Phantom outside the Hardwick Arms pub, Streetly.

The 40-year-old, jailed for four and a half years at London's Southwark Crown Court this week, was given an additional one year and three months for 113 separate counts of contempt of court. He failed to declare assets of £750,000 and was banned from being a company director for five years.

The fraud centred on the mobile phones and was busted after a four-and-a-half-year investigation by HM Revenue & Customs.

Paperwork found in searches of gang houses showed they planned to steal an additional £300m of VAT. The gang bought several houses worth more than £1m, a £165,000 Ferrari and a £1m villa in Spain.

Mobile phone accessories and electronic media including memory and SIM cards from the EU were imported.

Goods were sold on a number of times along a contrived supply chain and would be exported back in the EU. The exporter would claim a VAT credit from HMRC for the VAT paid on the purchase of the goods.

Admitted

Defendants admitted conspiracy to cheat the public revenue. Samra, a director of Goldfree Ltd of Birmingham, who lived in Sutton Coldfield, who was shot in 2006, was jailed with Ardi Singh Hayre, 27 of Lovelace Avenue, Solihull, who was sentenced to two years and 10 months in prison.

Terence Thomas Broad, 65, of Brown Edge, Stoke-on-Trent, was sentenced to one year and four months.

Russell Crowther, 48 of Abergele, Conwy, North Wales, was sentenced to two years and three months and Syed Faraz Hussain, 28 of Woking, Surrey, was sentenced to two years and 10 months in prison. Other defendants were also banned from being directors. Cameron Charles Thurston, 35 of Surrey, is to be sentenced this week.



Terence Broad



Ardi Singh Hayre



Syed Faraz Hussain



Russell Crowther

Bus route getting diverted to help

Bus service Arriva Midlands has diverted its service 2, which travels from Cannock to Walsall via Bloxwich. The company was asked to divert its bus after rival operator Midland withdrew its commercial 5 service which travelled around some of Bloxwich's main routes.

Service 2 will now travel along Turnberry Road, Broad Lane and Bell Lane between the A34, Stafford Road and Bloxwich High Street.

It will also take in Somerfield Road and Leamore Lane between High Street and Bloxwich Road. The service operates on Mondays to Saturdays. Keith Myatt, communications manager of Arriva Midlands, said: "The changes being introduced to service 2 follow consultation with Centro."

Pupils planting for the future



Margaret Lipscombe from the Tree Council with Chucky Primary pupils Fleur Palmer-Paquis and Tauheed Arif, both aged 10, who helped.

Volunteers braved the bad weather to plant 1,000 new trees and shrubs in Walsall Arboretum.

People pulled on their wellies and grabbed their spades to plant the trees in the park's extension, near the cricket club.

In total, The Woodland Trust is providing 3,000 trees and shrubs and the Tree Council another 1,000 fruiting trees and shrubs.

Walsall Arboretum User Group

organised the work, along with the green spaces department at the council. Jo Lester, chairman of Walsall Arboretum User Group, said: "This is a major tree planting initiative to provide a greener future."

As well as group members and volunteers schoolchildren from Chucky Primary took part in the planting.

Also there will be 260 old trees removed from the park as part of its revamp.

Boss appeals to good neighbours

A director at Walsall's Primary Care Trust (PCT) is appealing for people to be good neighbours to vulnerable residents this winter.

Susan Laverty, joint interim director of public health at NHS Walsall, said older people in the town are most at risk in the cold weather and their neighbours lending them a hand could make all the difference.

She said: "In the freezing conditions we have at present, being a good neighbour can literally make the difference between life and death. I would ask people to take a small amount of their time to follow a few basic principles of caring for those who are most vulnerable."

She appealed for householders to call in on older and more vulnerable neighbours and make sure they are safe and well and their homes are warm enough, especially at night. Also to ensure they have stocks of food and medicines so they don't have to venture out in the cold.

Winter always places more pressure on health services through increased cases of flu, colds and vomiting. For tips on how to tackle winter, visit www.walsall.nhs.uk

Friends of hospice given special honour

A charity support group was honoured at a special ceremony hosted by the Walsall Voluntary Action Group.

Sister Dora Friends of Walsall Hospice has been raising money for the new hospice in Walsall for more than 15 years.

From charity golf days to pig roasts, the group has so far raised £35,000 to create a specialist bathroom at the hospice.

Terry Robshaw, director of operations, said: "I would like to congratulate the Sister Dora Friends Group on their fantastic achievement and say that the award is a fitting tribute to, and in recognition of, all their efforts and support to the charity."

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Calls for vote rig inquiry

Calls have been made for an investigation into vote rigging at Walsall Council after a Tory party member and son of a councillor was locked up for electoral fraud.

Ali Hayder Munir, who has been expelled from the Conservative party, was jailed for three months after admitting two charges of making false applications for proxy votes.

He is the son of Palfrey representative Mohammed Munir, who was also charged with election fraud but cleared of any wrongdoing.

Labour leader Councillor Tim Oliver is now demanding an inquiry into the council, saying it is not enough "to wait for the police to catch the bad apples".

But Walsall Council leader Mike Bird said there was no need for an investigation and the police and Crown Prosecution Service were doing their jobs well and rooting out any corruption.

Councillor Oliver said past calls to investigate what was happening in the borough's three Conservative constituency parties had been ignored.

He said: "The conviction of Ali Munir is deeply worrying for all involved in the democratic process in Walsall."

"It's not enough for political parties to wait for the police to catch the bad apples." But Councillor Bird said corruption could occur in any political party - and highlighted the Birmingham election scandal in 2005 when six Labour councillors were found guilty of vote-rigging and Judge Richard Mawrey said electoral fraud in the city would "disgrace a banana republic".

Chairman gives £1,000

An elderly woman presented a Walsall charity with a cheque for £1,000.

Anne Wrighton, aged 86, of Castle Drive, Willenhall, is chairman of the Willenhall Area Relief Rehabilitation and Nursing Trust (Warrant), and presented the cheque to Walsall Hospice.

The trust has donated thousands to Black Country charities, gained through the interest on donations and invested during the Second World War. It has also donated cash to Walsall Manor Hospital, Willenhall Nursing Association and New Cross Hospice.

Mrs Wrighton said: "One never knows who is the next person to go in to a hospice. I have nursed friends with cancer and I know there's a need for the hospice. We need another hospice in Walsall, for the Walsall people."

Charities boost

People on a housing estate raised almost £900 for two charities at a community social night. Burrowes Street Tenant Management Organisation arranged entertainment, held a raffle and a collection to raise a total of £889.60. Proceeds from the event held at the TMO community room, Burrowes Street, in October have been donated to the Help For Heroes charity and Diabetes UK.

Second award win

Staff and pupils from a Walsall secondary school are celebrating after winning their second national award in the past year.

Joseph Leckie Community Technology College, Delves, has been named the winner of the Children and Young People Now National Extended School Award.

Education secretary Michael Gove made the announcement. It comes

after Joseph Leckie won the Continuity Learning Exchange Award for 2009 to 2010.

Since being designated as an extended school six years ago, the college has offered services to benefit children, young people, their families and the community as a whole.

The services include a free breakfast club and after college study support.

Old photos wanted

People are reminded they can submit their old and new photos of high streets as part of a nostalgic BBC programme. Walsall's Local History Centre, libraries, museum and district centre managers are encouraging people to record memories of shops and shopping. The project is being run with the BBC series 'Turn Back Time the High Street', being shown during Novem-

ber and December. Each week the programme takes a group of shopkeepers back to the 1870s and then forward through time. Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall libraries as well as the museum will have photos and maps on display. People can bring photos in to the museum and from Tuesday to Friday between 10am and 5pm and on Saturday from 10am to 4pm.

Plan for estate is rejected

Plans to transform wasteland off Reedwood Way near Reedwood Retail Park, Walsall, into a 140 home estate have been refused.

Planning bosses said it was the borough's best spot for business development.

Councillors went along with a recommendation to refuse the application for outline planning permission submitted by developer Parkhill Estates Ltd, based in Newport. Walsall Council planners described the location as the borough's "current best single strategic site for employment development".

In a report to the planning committee planning officer Andrew Thompson said: "The presumption is to retain the site in employment use unless there is a material consideration that outweighs this retention."

"The applicant's case to justify the departure has been set out but is not seen as correct or conclusive."

Parkhill Estates Ltd's proposal was stalled by officers demanding more information on the scheme.

Paddock councillor Zahid Ali spoke in favour of the scheme claiming it could create employment opportunities.

Bentley and Darlaston North Councillor Bill Madeley, who spoke against the scheme, said: "Prime industrial sites are being built on and that always concerns me."

Visitors from Middle East

An international friendship group in Walsall played host to visitors from Palestine as part of a project.

Abdulsater Yasin and Mohammed Awadallah from the Middle East, visited the borough as guests of Walsall Kobor Friendship Association. The visitors live in Kobor near Ramallah in the West Bank of Palestine.

Mr Yasin, the co-ordinator, Mr Awadallah, a dental student, spent 10 days visiting projects. As a result of the visit internet links are to be developed between Blue Coat Performing Arts College, Birmingham Street, and Palfrey Junior School, in Milton Street, and Butts Primary Schools, Butts Road, with schools in Kobor, which has a population of 4,000.

Review for killer Morris

Cannock Chase child killer Raymond Morris will have his case reviewed on December 16.

The 81-year-old, who is fighting to clear his name, will have a top judge review his case at Leeds Administrative Court.

Morris has been in jail for 42 years for the murder of seven-year-old Walsall girl Christine Darby in 1967.

The former engineer from Green Lane, Walsall, is the prime suspect in the killings of schoolgirls Margaret Reynolds of Aston and Diane Tiff of Bloxwich. His bid for an appeal was rejected by the Criminal Cases Review Commission in June but next month's hearing will be a judicial review of that decision.

Blatant thieves steal scaffolding from yard

Metal thieves got away with £3,500 of scaffolding after driving into a maintenance yard in Walsall and loading the poles into their van as workmen watched.

Staff at the maintenance yard, in Bescot Road under Junction 9 of the M6, Walsall, assumed the thieves were legitimate workers. Police are now appealing for information to track down the gang. The stolen scaffolding was 8-inch cup lock poles bearing the logo of the owner, walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

Crime in the town shows a fall, claim

Anti-social behaviour, including youths drinking in parks, graffiti scrawled on buildings and gangs being rowdy in the streets and intimidating passers-by, is falling in a Walsall town, police have claimed.

In October 2007 there were 290 reports of anti-social behaviour in Darlaston.

But in October 2010, there were 153 calls made to West Midlands Police after patrols in areas like public parks were stepped up and litter picks and graffiti clean-ups organised to help ease the problems.

A police car has also been dedicated to patrol the streets between 2pm and 10pm every day on the look out for trouble.

Sgt Jo Winters said today: "We take anti-social behaviour very seriously and treat this as a priority."

"We have been working very closely with Lyndon Parkes, the new neighbourhood manager from the area, and since the summer I have only seen good things happen in relation to anti-social behaviour in the area."

Derelict

Officers and the council have removed unsightly graffiti from the derelict buildings which are owned by Darlaston FC.

Future plans include bollards being fitted to prevent vehicle access to the buildings and officers will continue to patrol.

In October 2007 there were 290 calls of anti-social behaviour to the police, followed by 180 in October 2008, 198 in October 2009 and 153 in October of this year.

In Victoria Park, which has been dogged by problems for years, officers have increased patrols and any youths found boozing or misbehaving are dealt with by police and reported to the anti-social behaviour unit at Walsall Council.

Shrubs and trees have also been cut back around the children's play area to give better visibility and to create a safer environment for children and families.

Incidents

The theft took place between 9am and 11am on November 25.

Metal thieves have hit the region hard in recent months, with more than 900 incidents in just a three-month period.

The crime wave has been fuelled by soaring metal prices, which have been triggered by construction booms in the Middle East.

In the past few weeks, thieves have stolen copper cable between temporary traffic lights in Willenhall and £1,000 of scrap brass castings from Abbey Saddlery, Walsall.

On November 21, £25,000 of copper was taken from PR Metals Ltd, Brownhills and £15,000 of manhole covers from Willenhall, Darlaston and Moxley in October.

Anyone with information on the scaffolding theft can call Pc Gardiner on 0345 113 5000 extension 7881 6871.

Santa slides in for switch-on



Mayor Councillor Gary Clarke and Mayoress Mrs Yvonne Clarke meet local youngsters and Father Christmas.



Father Christmas arrives on his sleigh at Lower Farm for the switch on.

Words and pictures by Stuart Williams

Christmas has well and truly arrived on a Walsall estate.

Lower Farm saw the arrival of Santa and the Mayor and Mayoress of Walsall for the annual switching-on of the estate's Christmas tree lights.

Councillor Gary Clarke and Mrs. Yvonne Clarke were joined by local youngsters and parents on Friday night to welcome the arrival of Father Christmas on his sleigh.

Despite a lower turn-out than usual due to the bitterly cold weather, the event went off without a hitch after both Santa and the Mayor were surrounded by eager youngsters on the snow-covered traffic island in Buxton Road, with many other local people looking on as the Mayor switched on the lights.

Since 1996, Lower Farm has had a Christmas tree with lights, a tradition founded and organised by Mrs. Maggie Bull and the now disbanded Lower Farm Community Association who for many years arranged for the collection of donations in support of the tree and lights.

This year, as with last, when the lights were supported by the community, the tree was donated by generous Bloxwich East Councillors Les Bealey and Bill Tweddle, and installed by Walsall Council workmen. Councillor Tweddle, who has been ill for some months, was sadly unable to attend the ceremony but was represented by co-donor Councillor Bealey.

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thechronicle

Search for rail worker's attacker



The man police wish to identify.

This is a CCTV image of the man police want to trace after a railway worker was punched in the face on a train.

The worker was travelling home after his shift when he was the victim of an unprovoked attack by a man who then jumped off in Walsall and fled.

British Transport Police warned they would not tolerate attacks on members of staff as they released this CCTV image of a man they want to speak to.

Pc Jasbir Bathal, investigating officer, said: "The member of staff boarded the train at Bescot and

sat in the rear carriage. Sitting opposite him was a man who began engaging him in conversation and making random comments.

"When the train arrived at Walsall rail station at around 11.45pm, the man got up and sat on the arm of a seat next to the member of staff.

"Then, without warning or provocation, the man punched the member of staff in the face before running off."

Police want to speak to a man who is believed to have boarded the train at Aston rail station.

He is white, aged about 28, around 5ft 6ins, of average build and was wearing a brown jacket.

The attack happened on November 1 as the worker was travelling on the 11.15pm service from Birmingham New Street to Hednesford.

Anyone who recognises the man in the shot can call British Transport Police on Freephone 0800 40 50 40, quoting incident number B6 of 29/11/2010.

Alternatively, they can call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111.

Apathy on dog fines bid

Just 30 people had their say in a consultation over the introduction of a £1,000 fine for dog owners who let their pooches off leads in Walsall.

Views on the plan - which would include all Walsall's parks - was being sought by council chiefs. The consultation period has now closed.

Council chiefs are proposing to make it a criminal offence if people fail to keep their dogs on leads or allow them to wander into certain parts of parkland.

A limit on the number of dogs a person can take into the borough's parks could also be introduced, along with a £1,000 fine for owners who fail to clean up after their pets.

Leisure chief Councillor Anthony Harris, said: "We have received just over 30 responses to the survey.

"Officers will now be looking through the responses and pulling all the information together into a report."

Charities get boost from Christmas fair

Proceeds from a Christmas fair in Walsall will give a boost to two charities.

The event was held at the Broadway United Reformed Church in Broadway where visitors got to pay a visit to Father Christmas.

Margaret Stevenson, co-ordinator of the event said: "It was a lovely day there were crowds of people. We had a very successful day.

"We had a fancy goods store with all handmade things.

"There was also a children's stall and a home made food stall, plants, toys, jewellery, music, jigsaw and book stall."

Proceeds will be split between counselling service The Samaritans as well as the International Rescue Corps, which provides search and rescue teams all over the world.

Mrs Stevenson added: "We choose charities to support each year and it was narrowed down to these at the church meeting.

"We would also like to thank everyone who turned out and made the event such a success."



Sybil Heavens of the pins and needles group on the fancy goods stand.

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Son is sent to prison over balloting fraud

walsallchronicle@
expressandstar.co.uk

Police have warned against election fraud after a Walsall councillor's son was jailed for falsifying votes.

Ali Hayder Munir, son of Councillor Mohammed Munir, admitted two charges of making false applications for proxy votes for the Walsall Council elections which were held back in 2008.

It was said that Munir, aged 30, of Thorpe Road, Caldmore, played an active role in his father's campaign team both in a legal fashion and an illegal one.

Mr Adrian Keeling, prosecuting, said Munir had used the names of real people and filled in forms to get them on the electoral register and then apply for proxy votes, but had used fake details and forged signatures.

Mr Keeling said "oddities" were spotted before the election took place and the votes invalidated. Mr Sunil Sandhu, defending, said the fraud was amateurish.

Fraudulent

Judge Melbourne Inman QC told Munir: "You submitted fraudulent applications to vote by proxy in relation to two individuals who were, of course, wholly unaware that their names were being used for this purpose."

Palfrey ward Councillor Mohammed Munir, aged 58, also of Thorpe Road, was accused of forging signatures on 11 voting applications ahead of the 2008 council elections. He was cleared after his trial.

Police welcomed his son's 12 weeks jail sentence, saying it sent out a clear message the democratic process would be protected. Detective Sergeant Paddy Gillice said: "In his summing up, Judge Melbourne Inman QC mentioned that the most important feature of our democratic process is that it must be free from corruption."

"He continued to say the court has a duty to protect it and that any individual involved in electoral fraud will inevitably attract a custodial sentence."



Ali Munir - jailed for three months.



Councillor Mohammed Munir.

History centre monitoring

The number of visitors to Walsall's Local History Centre will be monitored over the next few weeks as council chiefs draw up plans to cut hours. Bosses are to identify the busy spells at the Essex Street venue.

The centre and Walsall Museum are both being restructured as part of a hard-hitting plan to save £65 million over the next three years. As well as scaling back opening hours at the centre, there will also be a reduction in the number of posts, conservation of, and work on, collections and outreach work.

Walsall Museum will also have fewer staff and less temporary exhibition space. Council chiefs pledged to do "the best they

can with the tools available".

Leisure chief Anthony Harris, said: "Walsall's fascinating history and proud past are important to this council and to the community."

"We are examining ways to ensure the services and opportunities offered by the Local History Centre and Walsall Museum continue in what are challenging times."

"We will be reducing the amount of temporary exhibition space at Walsall Museum so that we only have to supervise one floor instead of two." Changes at the Local History Centre could save Walsall Council more than £188,000 over three years.

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Burglar sent to prison for pensioner attack

walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

A burglar from Willenhall has been handed a five-year jail sentence for attacking a pensioner in her Wolverhampton home and blighting the last months of her life.

John Rooney tricked his way into the 86-year-old's home in Prestwood Road, Fallings Park, after bumping into her as she returned from posting a letter.

Wolverhampton Crown Court heard how Mrs Jacobs, who had been burgled before, unwittingly invited Rooney inside when he asked if he could use the bathroom. She later found him in her bedroom.

The 36-year-old was rummaging through drawers.

Mr Timothy Harrington, prosecuting, told how Rooney followed the pensioner downstairs and grabbed her purse, pushing her away when she put a hand on his arm to stop him.

She suffered severe bruising to her wrist when she fell against the fireplace and was greatly distressed, the court heard.

The victim has since died following an unrelated fall.

Clouded

Judge Nicholas Webb told Rooney: "The last few months of her life were clouded by this incident and you are responsible for that."

The court was told last week how two people outside an off-licence across the street had spotted Rooney lurking in the alleyway before the break-in at Mrs Jacobs' home.

Four days earlier he had broken into a property in Halesworth Road, Pendeford, while a couple were enjoying lunch at a local pub.

They returned to find the back door kicked open and the husband's wallet missing.

A neighbour, one of three who saw Rooney's green Audi van outside, was able to give detectives the registration number.

He was arrested six days later in the city centre. Rooney, of Bridge Street, Willenhall, pleaded guilty to both burglaries, which took place on May 28 and June 1.

Defending him, John Roe said Rooney had a number of serious convictions, including rape, but only one for burglary.

"He very much regrets his behaviour and feels remorse on hearing of Mrs Jacobs' death," he added. "The judge increased Rooney's sentence because of the violence used on Mrs Jacobs."

He told Rooney: "There is no mitigation on your case except for your guilty plea."

Graduates on parade in town



Hundreds of students parading through Walsall after graduation

Hundreds of Walsall College students paraded through the town centre in their caps and gowns to mark their graduation.

They took part in a procession from the Wisemore Campus, along Park Street, ending up at Walsall Town Hall for a ceremony.

The parade on Friday was led by town crier Cyril Richardson and included more than 450 students who completed courses such as Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Foundation Degrees.

They were given certificates for

their successes and special awards were presented for outstanding achievement. The students had been on business on creative industries, digital and technology, health and public services and services to people. They are seen as a step towards university.

Walsall College principal and chief executive Amarjit Basi said: "By choosing higher education, our students have equipped themselves with the skills, knowledge and experience to succeed, as they go on to study at university or gain employment in their chosen industry."

New toddler group is growing

A new toddler group in Walsall has moved to bigger premises just three months after setting up. Parent and toddler group Coalpool Little Lambs was created in June in the hall at Coalpool Methodist Church, and

within weeks it attracted 19 children plus adults. Organisers have now moved the group to the larger Dartmouth Youth Centre, New Forest Road. The group meets Wednesdays 9.30am to 11.30am.

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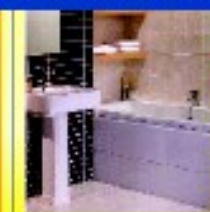
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thechronicle

Mayor heaps praise on winners of 'Doras'



From left Mayor Councillor Gary Clarke, Jackie Whitehouse, Mayoress Yvonne Clarke and John Whitehouse.



Glyn Marston with his award.



Reece Thornton.



June Davernhill.



From left Professor Carl Chinn, Cheryl Bradburne and the Mayor.

The Mayor of Walsall praised award winners for their wonderful work in the community.

Councillor Gary Clarke hosted the Mayor's Civic Awards ceremony, celebrating people who help others and make a difference.

"We are so lucky to have individuals who live and work in our borough who show commitment and dedication but whose good work often goes unnoticed," said the mayor. "I am delighted we are able

to recognise and celebrate their achievements."

The awards, affectionately known as the Doras after Walsall's nursing heroine, were held at Bank's Stadium recently and hosted by historian and columnist Professor Carl Chinn.

Tireless

Julie Rafiq of Delves was named citizen of the year for her tireless work with youths on her estate.

The 40-year-old was praised for building the Delvz Youth Shed. She also formed the Delvz youth football team and

helped form a support group for parents of children with special needs.

The young citizen of the year award went to 17-year-old Reece Thornton of Walsall Wood who raised money for ward 10 of Birmingham Children's Hospital after his sister was treated for a brain tumour.

Greta Walker, aged 47, of Walsall, who has battled dyslexia, won the overcoming all odds award, and Glyn Marston, aged 47, of Darlaston, won the outstanding sporting achievement award.

The creative spirit award

went to June Davernhill, 74, of Pelsall, in recognition of her "musical inspiration".

Other winners included the Hi's n Low's organisation led by Tracey Gibbs and Phillip Mason of St Paul's Church, Walsall which won the neighbourhood safety award.

Improving Walsall's quality of life award went to Madeleine Holland of Caldmore, and husband and wife Jackie and John Whitehouse of Short Heath, Willenhall, won Walsall's Green Award.

They have been involved with the Friends of Rough Wood since it was set up.

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Lunch clubs instead of meals on wheels

walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

A £220,000 new community meals service which will bring hundreds of vulnerable people together at lunch clubs across Walsall, will be launched next year.

The move comes after Walsall Council announced it was revolutionising meals-on-wheels in the borough to save more than £1million over the next three years – with plans to rely more on the private sector and volunteers in the community.

Taste for Life will be run by Caldmore Housing Association, Age UK Walsall and Walsall Housing Regeneration Agency but Walsall Council has pledged hundreds of thousands of pounds to keep the scheme running until March 2012.

It is expected to be used by between 300 and 400 people, who will be transported from their homes to lunch clubs at community venues across the borough.

New clubs are expected to be set up under the scheme, but several existing ones across the borough will also be used. It is hoped the meals scheme in Walsall will be adopted nationally if it proves to be a success.

Contract

Sodexo, which runs the meals-on-wheels service throughout Walsall, will finish its contract by January. Those who sign up to a new £220,000 community meals service in Walsall will be given the chance to help shape the scheme.

Existing clubs at places such as Beacon Church, Pheasey, and the Collingwood Centre, Great Barr, will be used.

But people who sign up will also be asked where they want to see other lunch clubs set up.

Flyers have been posted through doors asking people to call a 24-hour line if they want to join the scheme.

It will also link in with the Help at Home service run by Caldmore Housing and Age UK Walsall, offering domestic help such as gardening or DIY to the elderly.

Davina Lytton, of Age UK Walsall, said: "It is a fantastic local initiative and a model which has national potential with the right support."

Mike Hew, chief executive of Caldmore Housing Association, added: "We are committed to working with the council to ensure people eat well but also benefit from an enhanced social network through lunch clubs, exercise sessions and other community activities in partnership with Church Links, other local agencies and the Help at Home service launched in July."

Anyone interested in joining the scheme can call 0121 568 3973.

Here's to you Mrs Robinson



Dinner lady Rita Robinson says goodbye to pupils at Birchills Primary School.

Tears were shed as teachers and pupils waved goodbye to a dinner lady with 35 years service.

Lunchtime supervisor Rita Robinson, aged 72, retired at Birchills Church of England Primary Community School, Farrington Street, Walsall. She arrived in 1975, when it was still Birchills CE Junior School. Shortly afterwards the school changed name, and in 1986 Mrs Robinson was promoted to junior department principal supervisor. She said: "I have had 35 wonderful

years with the children. The job has been a challenge at times but always wonderful. I have enjoyed every minute." She said she hoped to spend more time gardening, reading and visiting the theatre in her retirement. She will also have her hands full with her six grandchildren.

Head Anthony Orlik said: "Mrs Robinson's service to the children of Birchills and the Birchills community has been absolutely outstanding. She has been an exceptional member of staff."

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£29m bus station being planned

A £29 million new bus station could be built in Walsall town centre.

The interchange would be created at Bradford Place – although transport bosses have warned the plan is part of a long-term vision.

The current satellite terminus in Bradford Place has been dogged by safety concerns, with some bus companies ordering their drivers to avoid it after 67 year old passenger Jean Lawrence was knocked over in July, 2009.

West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority Centre has included the planned station in the draft Local Transport Plan – a 15-year strategy to regenerate and develop the Black Country's transport networks.

The scheme has been listed as a "major scheme priority" for 2016 to 2026.

Steve Swingle, spokesman for Centre, said: "A new interchange in Walsall is included in the LTP, which is currently out for consultation."

"The idea is to realign Bridgeman Street which will create space for new facilities at Bradford Place which will then be developed, including a public square."

"It would help meet future growth aspirations of Walsall town centre," added Mr Swingle.

"This scheme would provide Walsall town centre with additional capacity for bus travel as it would exist alongside the main St Paul's bus station."

Arrests in blitz on drugs

Seven people were arrested and more than 100 cannabis plants seized during a drugs crackdown in Darlaston.

Police say they have been acting on tip-offs and have vowed more action will be taken.

They are now urging people to post information anonymously about anti-social behaviour and drug offences in special boxes in Darlaston and Moxley.

Sergeant Darren Finlan, based in Darlaston, said: "We have made a pledge that any information received from the local community will be acted upon and we are pleased with the results so far."

The information boxes have been set up at Darlaston post office, in Hall Street; Moxley People's Centre, in Queen Street; Moxley; Asda in St Lawrence Way and Maggie's Store, in Franchise Street, both in Darlaston.

Seven warrants have already been carried out in the past eight weeks. A 32-year-old woman was cautioned for possession of class B drugs after a raid.

Time to get festive on the Beacon

A charity fun run and a traditional Christmas fair will be on offer during a winter wonderland event.

Father Christmas will be the guest of honour at Beacon Wonderland on December 11 at Barr Beacon. The free event will run from 11am until 4pm and include the 5k Turkey Trot in aid of Walsall Hospice.

As well as the fun run, there will be a Christmas fair at nearby Collingwood Centre, Peasey, featuring gifts, crafts and festive bargains.

Aside from raising money for the Mayor of Walsall's Charity Appeal, which supports Walsall Hospice and various children's charities across the borough, it's hoped the event will raise the profile of Barr Beacon's restoration project.

Councillor Adrian Andrew, Barr Beacon Trust chairman, said: "Beacon Wonderland is a fantastic way to raise awareness of this important site while allowing visitors the chance to enjoy some old-fashioned Christmas cheer and support."

The Turkey Trot will start from Barr Beacon war memorial at 11.30am. Entry details are available on 01922 423578.



Rachel Riddler with Jo Ellis and Cheryl Bradburne, who are all from Walsall Hospice, getting ready for the Walsall Hospice Turkey Trot at Barr Beacon

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Revamp of Old Square hits setback

The revamp of the Old Square Shopping Centre in Walsall will not start until later next year.

A formal planning application was expected to be submitted by this month so the £21 million transformation could start in early 2011.

But this is now unlikely to be put forward until May meaning refurbishment will not get under way until around the summer at the earliest. Old Square owners Threadneedle have been in talks with Walsall Council about the phased redevelopment which needs formal planning permission.

Budget clothing giant Primark is negotiating to move into centre with another unconfirmed big name operator also earmarked. They would be seen as "anchors" to the scheme.

Larger, modern shop units are due to be created inside the outdated complex to revive its fortunes and draw more retailers into the town centre.

But despite hopes that an application would be in by the end of the year, council chiefs have admitted this is no longer expected.

Regeneration chief Councillor Adrian Andrew said: "We are expect-

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ing the application for the Old Square Shopping Centre in May.

"We are in the hands of Threadneedle. It will be a massive boost to Walsall."

"We have got the new Tesco which opened with new jobs created, and this will bring more jobs and footfall," Councillor Andrew added.

Transformation

More than 125,000 sq ft of floor space will be involved in the transformation which will take around 18 months to complete.

This includes the Tesco space which is closed after moving to the new superstore in Littleton Street West.

Tesco opened its £55 million store yesterday after eight months of construction.

The 10,880 sq metre store, which has created 230 jobs, boasts a 111-seater cafe, large clothing department, home entertainment centre, photo lab, phone shop and a pharmacy.

The Old Square, which dates back to the 1960s, now has more than a dozen empty units.

A spokesman for Threadneedle was unavailable for comment.

Breeding problem for RSPCA

Volunteers at the RSPCA branch in Walsall are over run with rabbits - after taking three into their care and ending up with 27.

Each of three rabbits found abandoned in the borough gave birth to eight, leaving the task of rehoming 27 bunnies.

Staff say they are not suitable as children's Christmas presents. Becky Weeks, branch welfare officer, said two were found in a box in Walsall and one was found on a grass verge on an Aldridge industrial estate. The first two litters are with foster carer Vicky Harrison at her Walsall home.

The third litter is not yet old enough for foster care. Miss Weeks said the branch were conscious about giving the pets to good homes.



Vicky Harrison with some of the rabbits she is looking after for the RSPCA.

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Knife slash man sent to jail

A man living in Walsall who slashed his friend's face with a knife in a drunken rage has been jailed. Adam Piechuta, aged 47, of Hilary Street, was sentenced to 20 months in prison by Wolverhampton Crown Court.

The former security guard, originally from Poland, had pleaded guilty to a charge of wounding at a previous hearing. He also admitted a charge of burglary. He was sentenced to 16 months in prison for the wounding and

four months for burglary to run consecutively. The wounding charge dated back to November last year, when Piechuta lived in Bradford, the court heard. Judge Hilary Watson heard Piechuta had been seen breaking into an address in Windsor Street, Walsall, on June 28 this year.

Mr David Lees, prosecuting, said, the neighbour called the police.

Mr Anwar Ramzan, defending, said his client had a drink problem.

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Pounding along with new stores opening

Poundland is opening new stores at a rate of one a week and eventually aims to more than double its empire, its chief executive said.

The Walsall-based bargain store, which opened its 300th shop at the end of last month, will take its tally to 320 stores across the UK by Christmas.

Chief executive Jim McCarthy, speaking from the company's headquarters in Willenhall, revealed plans to trade online in around two years and by Christmas, 20 new stores will have opened.

Mr McCarthy said ultimately, the company could one day have 800 stores across the UK. It has already announced plans for 50 new stores next year, creating 2,000 jobs.

Mr McCarthy said: "There are also some stores we would love to expand in the future. At the moment, we are going wherever the best site is for us."

Holyhead, Glasgow, Great Yarmouth and Oldham are the latest places to be added to the portfolio. Poundland now employs around 9,500, including 700 at its headquarters in Wellmans Road. It also has a giant distribution warehouse at Springvale, in Bilston.

Online

Plans are also afoot to start trading online, although this is at an early stage. Mr McCarthy said it was necessary for all retailers to have an online presence in the current climate.

"Internet is one of the things that is growing because it's convenient and because people have grown up with the technology," he said. "We have to consider things like postage costs but it is something we're looking into. There are categories of things we sell that I think would do tremendously well online."

"We are still looking into it all at the moment but it is something we will do, it just won't be for a couple of years yet." It is believed however, party goods and gifts could be sold online. This year, Poundland announced its operating profits in the 12 months to April had risen by a huge 81.5 per cent to £21.5 million.

It is now entering its most lucrative period as it prepares to cash in on Christmas - and is already looking forward to next December. It is expecting to sell more than 100 million items this December and McCarthy admitted: "It's going to be manic."

"At Christmas, it's like having five of our normal days - we get absolutely rammed with people seeking bargains. Immediately after Christmas we must start planning for the next Christmas."

Our trading team are working straight away with suppliers because the thing about us is we always have different items.

That's one of the special things about Poundland, you're never quite sure what you're going to get from it.

About 70 per cent of our Christmas range each year will be new stock. Work on merchandising and even displays also gets started



Jim McCarthy enjoying the success of Willenhall-based Poundland.

walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

in January or February, while getting the stock out to more than 320 stores across the UK is a military operation - especially when you're dealing with three million customers per week.

"Things have to be absolutely planned," says Mr McCarthy, who has previously worked on the boards of Sainsbury's and Tesco.

"We start to think about marketing really early, too, and that department gets behind the campaigns, and we also think about things like packaging. But getting the right products into the right stores in the right quantities is a real work of art and that starts to get delivered into the stores throughout September and then once we get through another busy time for us, Halloween, immediately after that the Christmas mayhem starts."

Maybe it is this meticulous and early planning that is helping Poundland, which employs around 9,500 workers, become one of the fastest expanding retailers in the country.

The most common phrase heard in Poundland is "How much is this?" "We still get that all the time," laughs Mr McCarthy.

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COMPETITION

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Shoppers are in for a treat thanks to local low price department store The Original Factory Shop, which opened a new outlet in Walsall on December 4.

To celebrate the store opening and as an extra special treat for shoppers this Christmas, we've teamed up with The Chronicles to offer readers the chance to win a share of £500 to spend in the new store, which is located at 5/6 Lichfield Road, Walsall Wood.

One lucky winner will get a "shopastic" £100 of The Original Factory Shop vouchers as a first prize. There will be four lots of £50 vouchers up for grabs as 2nd prizes and 10 runners-up will each receive £20 gift vouchers to spend.

With the fantastic prices in store you can be sure of your prize money going a long way.

Plus, with Christmas just around the corner you'll be able to pick a trolley full of decorations and gifts perfect for all the family at stunning prices.

The Original Factory Shop Walsall Wood brings an extensive range of men's, ladies' and children's fashions, as well as homewares, electricals and toiletries, including a large selection of branded goods, to the town.

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A group of approximately 15 people, mostly young adults, are posing for a photo. They are all wearing bright yellow t-shirts. Many of them have their arms raised in the air, some with clenched fists, suggesting a celebratory or enthusiastic mood. They are standing in front of a dark, possibly stone or brick wall. The lighting is somewhat dim, and the overall tone of the image is energetic and positive.

Hot-footed fundraisers walked across burning embers to raise cash for Walsall Hospice. A total of 22 people took part in the firewalk at Sporting Khalsa's football ground, Noose Lane, Willenhall.

Trudy Pratt, a partner of Waldrons Solicitors in Dudley, said: "Not many people can say they've walked on fire."

"To be offered the opportunity to do it and raise money for a

worthy cause was too good an opportunity to miss." Fundraiser for Walsall Hospice Jo Ellis said: "The whole event was very lively with everyone cheering on the firewalkers and drummers adding to the atmosphere."

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A smiling woman with blonde hair, wearing a pink cardigan over a white top, is holding a young child with blonde hair wearing a blue sweater. They are standing in front of a scenic landscape featuring a lake, green hills, and mountains in the background under a clear blue sky. The woman is looking directly at the camera, and the child is looking slightly to the side. The overall mood is warm and positive.



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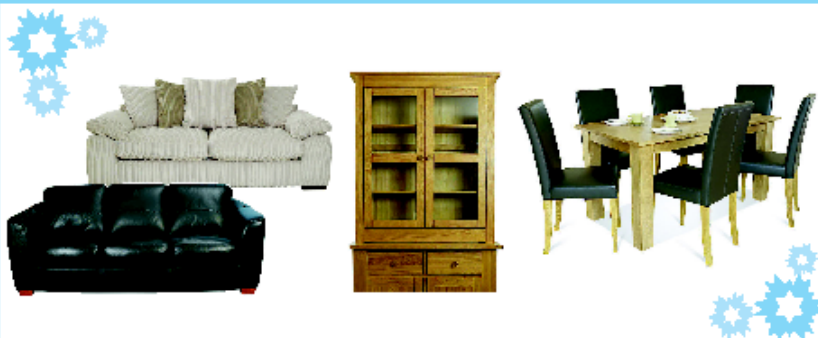
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thechronicle

Chapel's fate hangs in the balance

A Walsall chapel which shut eight months ago will need an estimated £100,000 in repairs to bring it back into use.

Services were last held at the St Andrew's Mission Church building on the Darlaston-Wednesbury border, last autumn.

No decision has been made by Lichfield Diocese over the future of the church which had also been used by Kings Hill Methodist congregation. The church is the responsibility of new parish priest Reverend Tim Vasy-Burnie.

He is also the vicar of St Bartholomew's in neighbouring Wednesbury.

Lichfield Diocese has held back from deciding whether to keep the Darlaston Road church or put it up for sale.

"We would need roughly £100,000 to repair the building and make it a good place to use for worship and other activities. Most of that would go on decorating the walls and ceiling," Mr Vasy-Burnie said.

"Having been vicar here for almost six months, I am discovering how much people have fond memories of St Andrew's and I am very grateful for the generous support they have given over the years."

"St Andrew's was built as a mission church so the people of Kings Hill might

discover and enjoy the good news of Jesus. Times change, buildings get old, but our mission remains the same. The future of the building remains unknown, unless we can find £100,000."

St Andrew's Mission Church was built in 1893 at cost of £1,700.

It had links to schools in the Kings Hill area and played a key role in the education of children in surrounding homes.

Dwindling numbers in recent years led to the closure of worship services in October 2009.

The building was being shared with Kings Hill Methodist congregation who have joined to Moxley Methodist Church.

Connie to sing to millions

Britain's Got Talent finalist Connie Talbot is to perform in front of 400 million viewers at China's New Year celebrations.

The announcement comes after the singer from Streetly recently returned from Seoul, in South Korea, where she performed in front of the world's leaders including Barack Obama and David Cameron at the G20 summit.

Next February the 10-year-old will sing in China's new year celebrations.

Connie's father Gavin, aged 43, said: "It's such an honour to be invited. She's really excited."

He added she was still deciding what to sing.

Connie was just six when she won the nation's hearts with her gap-toothed rendition of Somewhere Over the Rainbow.

The Blackwood Primary pupil also topped the Billboard Hot singles chart in the US during 2008.

David gets some fresh hair in centre

A hairdresser who hit the headlines with his online style school took his salon out into the high street in search of shoppers.

David James, who operates from his salon in Lichfield Road, Walsall Wood, has uploaded more than 10 videos to YouTube offering hints and tips on hair care and celebrity styles.

The 26-year-old, from New Invention, Willenhall, recently went into Walsall's Saddlers Centre where he did dozens of makeovers, some of which were filmed and put online.

They have attracted almost 3,000 hits so far.

He also completed three sponsored head shaves which raised more than £800 for Macmillan Cancer Support.

Staff at Poundland and the shopping centre's security guards also had their hair sprayed bright colours for the cause.

To view the video clips, visit www.d-james.co.uk



David James was out about in Walsall town centre.

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Like last year's Hyde Park show, their forthcoming December 2010 arena shows add out in seconds and the Kings of Leon's Summer 2011 concerts are set to be one of the highlights of next year's live calendar.



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thechronicle

Legend of local club scene Jack dies, 74

walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

A legend of the Midlands club scene who helped launch the careers of legions of local stars over 40 years has died.

Tributes were paid to Walsall promoter Jack Stain, chairman and formerly secretary of South Staffs Entertainment Council. The 74-year-old suffered a heart attack after being taken ill at his home in Short Heath, Willenhall, following a shopping trip with wife Stella.

His death on came just eight days after he joined the cream of the region's club scene for the council's annual awards ceremony at Banks's Stadium in Walsall. The father of two had 8,000 performers in his contacts book.

More than 260 people came to the evening of music and comedy, the highlight of the council's events calendar, on November 18.

Tremendous

Michael Butterfield, 51, who is taking over as chairman of the entertainment council, said Mr Stain's "legacy would go on".

"He was an unbelievable man who did tremendous things for clubs, pubs and entertainers in the region," he added. "I don't think there's going to be a church big enough for his funeral."

Born in Darlaston, Mr Stain combined his love of the entertainment scene with his job as a tool-setter and later a foreman at GKN engineering.

He retired when he was made redundant aged 60 and, despite admitting he found it hard to adjust to life without work, enjoyed spending time with his devoted wife.

Singer Joanna Rose, 43, who said Jack Stain gave her her first break in entertainment, said she was devastated by the news of his death.

"I'm gutted. It's affected my gigs all over the weekend. He was like a dad to me."

"In fact my 17-year-old daughter, Emily Rose, who is also a singer, used to call him Granddad," said the mother-of-seven from Telford.

"He was the man who gave me my first shot at singing and nine years later, I'm 17 awards better off."

Mr Stain's funeral will take place on December 9 at St Lawrence's Church, Darlaston from 12.30pm followed by burial at Lawn Lane Cemetery, Willenhall.



Entertainments promoter Jack Stain with comedienne Our Trace.

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thechronicle

Vandals still target The Bell

Yobs are continuing to break into Willenhall's historic Bell Inn, prompting another boost in security.

The derelict pub, in Market Place, was bought by a consortium, of four people who are intending to restore the Grade-II listed building for the good of the community.

But vandals continue to break into the site, rip tiles off the roof, scrawl graffiti and smash whatever they can find.

Rupy Pandaal, one of the consortium, said the damage was "pointless". He said: "It's just mindless vandalism. I can't understand it. The building is a pro-Willenhall thing, so why damage it? It's just mindless idiots who do it."

"We have had a good tidy up in the yard, but people are still clearly getting in from the alley and vandalising things."

The other three people making up the consortium which bought the building at auction are Wendy Evans, Stan Taylor and Ralph Jackson. They were meeting with council officers to discuss plans to make the building more secure.

Coffee cash

A fundraising coffee morning for Walsall Hospice raised £300.

The event was held at Christ Church, Blakenall Heath, in October, as part of activities to support charities at home and abroad. Some of the money was raised through greeting cards

Spirit of Sister Dora lives on in sculpture

An £18,000 glass sculpture has been unveiled as a permanent tribute to heroic nurse Sister Dora and her good works in Walsall.

The 7ft sculpture, which is called the Spirit of Sister Dora, is in the new main entrance area of Walsall Manor Hospital, Pleck Road. Earlier this year, Skanska, who constructed the new hospital, gave a donation to commission sculptor Steve Yeates to create the statue.

Local heroine was adopted by the people

Sister Dora was a nursing heroine, who in the eyes of the people in Walsall was on a par with Florence Nightingale.

She was born Dorothy Wyndlow Pattison in Yorkshire in January, 1832.

She arrived in the town 33 years later and was adopted by people of the borough. In 1875, Walsall was hit by smallpox and an epidemic hospital was set up in Deadman's Lane, now Hospital Street. Sister Dora worked there for six months, risking her own life for the people of Walsall. Later, an infection closed the Cottage Hospital at The Mount, following horrific injuries to workers in a local ironworks explosion.

The hospital moved to temporary accommodation overlooking the railway station and Sister Dora was again hard at work. During 1876, Sister Dora attended 12,127 patients but her own health suffered and she died on Christmas Eve, 1878.

It was made from recycled glass taken from windows of the recently demolished east wing.

It is intended to act as a reminder of the hospital's heritage and the energy, dedication and spirit of care provided to the people of Walsall - values closely associated with the work of Sister Dora.

Hospital staff, patients and members of the community gathered for the unveiling ceremony, which involved readings by community faith leaders before hospital nurse director Sue Hartley untied the ribbon around the sculpture.

Delighted

She said: "We are delighted to have such a wonderful piece of art displayed in our main entrance, especially as it's of Sister Dora, who really was a remarkable nurse and is an iconic figure to the staff at the Manor and the people of Walsall."

"The artist has done a brilliant job in capturing the essence of Sister Dora and it will be a reminder to all who pass through the doors of our new hospital, of all that Sister Dora stood for when she worked so hard and with endless compassion here in Walsall."

The Mayor of Walsall, Councillor Gary Clarke also joined the ceremony and thanked the London sculptor, adding that the spirit of Sister Dora was alive across the borough.



Nurse director at Walsall Manor Hospital Sue Hartley, hospital chief executive Sue James and sculptor Steve Yeates at the new Sister Dora statue.

Charity shop in a double plea for help

A charity shop which also helps people get back into work has launched an urgent double appeal. Bridging the Gap is wants people to donate their old and unwanted items to sell in the shop at Stafford Street, Willenhall.

Man, 37, gets jail for spray

A man taken to Walsall police station for questioning was found in possession of pepper spray, a court heard.

Mark Johnson, aged 37, of Rowley Street, Chuckery, Walsall, was sentenced to 10 weeks in prison for possessing the spray at Walsall Magistrates Court.

Mr Kulbir Paul, prosecuting, said the pepper spray was found in Johnson's underwear.

Miss Tamina Greaves, defending, said Johnson, who has a previous conviction for violence, had been attacked in his home and he bought the pepper spray online.

Crafts show

Craft and hobby groups based in Aldridge Community Centre, Midlemore Lane, will host an open day on Saturday from 11am to 4pm to show the skills on offer. There will be display stalls and demonstrations such as flower arranging.

It also needs more people to lend a hand, including shop assistants, sorters, cleaners and administrators.

Bridging the Gap also works with Steps to Work, Groundwork, Remploy and People Serve by helping unemployed people to gain retail experience.

The rear sorting area has recently been turned into a dedicated interview room so clients with mobility problems will still be able to drop in and get help.

The work has been carried out by the Men's Group from the Church at Junction 10, in Wolverhampton Road, Walsall. Bridging the Gap is also appealing for anyone to help with its fundraising challenges.

Mike Batchelor, who runs the service, said: "The current economic situation of the country has impacted on our fundraising activities and we are finding it harder to secure the level of funding we need to maintain our service levels."

"We have the benefit of an active charity shop but this still leaves us at least £55 per day short which has to be raised from charitable sources."

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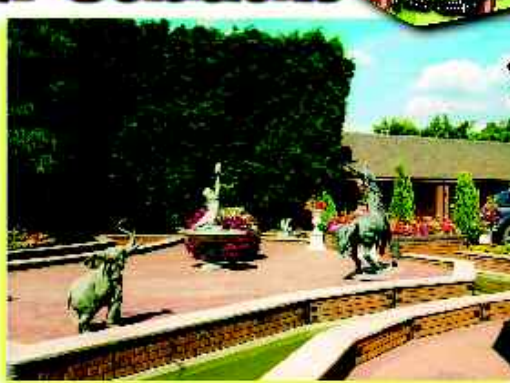
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thechronicle

Recession hits homes plan

A scheme to build more than 120 homes on canal-side land near Walsall town centre has been delayed due to the downturn in the building industry.

The Locks development, which was earmarked for land along-side Birchills Locks on Walsall Canal, is part of a £150 million project to transform the area, including nearby Town Wharf.

Property firm K4 Investments bought 2.5 acres of land for 92 flats and 30 houses near the junction of Wolverhampton Road and Hollyhedge Lane.

That was more than three

years ago, now owner Ravi Sinha said, "The plans are still there, but because of the situation and difficult economic times we are in, along with many other developers, we've had to put things on hold. We are still striving to do something in Walsall."

When the properties are eventually built they will be opposite Smiths Flour Mill, which has been converted into 132 apartments by Gr8 space and next to The Orange Tree pub which is not part of the development.

The main block facing Wolverhampton Road, will be six

storeys high with the rest of the site no more than four storeys high.

Mr Sinha negotiated with landowners to acquire the land after spotting the site's development potential.

He was attracted by its close proximity to the town centre and the M6. The Locks scheme was approved by Walsall Council's planning committee in June 2007.

If the construction work does not start in 2012, K4 Investments Ltd will need to re-apply for planning permission.

Traders show Christmas spirit for town

A Christmas tree is lighting up Walsall town centre after businesses rallied round to save festivities axed due to a lack of funding.

Traders stepped in to save the day after it emerged the tree and annual celebrity lights switch-on would not be held due to the demise of Walsall Town Centre Partnership earlier this year.

Numerous companies - including the 30-member Walsall Pub-watch - donated cash to cover the £8,000 cost of getting a 45ft-high spruce installed and decorated with lights at the front of The Crossing of St Paul's, in Darwall Street.

Mayor and Mayoress of Walsall, Councillor Gary Clarke and his wife Yvonne, were in attendance at last week's no-frills switch-on in the town.

"This is exactly why I'm proud of Walsall because individuals, businesses and organisations work together as a community to get things done which doesn't happen in many other places," said the mayor.



Walsall traders cheer as the lights are switched on the tree in Darwall Street

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the pulse

There is nothing like a dame

Clary doing a turn again with panto virgin Joan



Joan Collins - debut

DICK Whittington hits the stage at Birmingham Hippodrome this festive season starring Joan Collins - in her panto debut - and Julian Clary, who began his comedy career under the name 'The Joan Collins Fan Club'.

Also appearing in the star-studded show will be Walsall-born Hi-De-Hi star Jeffrey Holland as the Dame, and actor Nigel Havers (as King Rat) who recently quit the jungle by storming off TV show I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!

Top of the bill will be glamorous former Dynasty star Joan Collins, who will be the wicked Queen Rat. Keith Harris and Orville the Duck play the rat catchers.

Julian Clary, who will be returning to the Hippodrome to play The Spirit of the Bells, said: "This is probably the biggest and most lavish pantomime I have ever been involved in."

Dick Whittington opens on Saturday, December 18, and runs until January 30.



3D magic comes to Wolverhampton this festive season when an animated genie will be among the stars of the Grand's pantomime, Aladdin, alongside top panto dame Christopher Biggins.

Rocks, spiders and a head-spinning genie come flying towards the audience in hi-tech special effects in the show from panto production house Qdos, which will be staged at the Grand from Saturday, December 11, to January 30.

Former 'King of the Jungle' Biggins and hip comedy ventriloquist Paul Zerdin will ensure lots of chuckles during the city's big Christmas show but the biggest wow factor will come when audiences put on the special glasses issued by the usherettes.

"It's going to be a spectacular pantomime"

Christopher Biggins interview - page 38.



YOUR EIGHT-PAGE ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE AND WEEK'S TV VIEWING



Sophie Ellis-Bextor is going back on tour - interview - page 33



Glenn's homage to home - page 38

Pulse is taking a Christmas break but will be back in the New Year.

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the pulse

REVIEWS

An Evening with
Gervase Phinn
Prince of Wales Theatre,
Cannock.

Jesus came from an egg. How? Because Mary laid him in a manger or at least that's how one young girl saw it in the world according to raconteur and professional Yorkshireman Gervase Phinn.

Phinn was on form with his endless stream of observations, poignant tales and anecdotes which he has collected through many years as an Ofsted inspector in and around the Yorkshire Dales.

He kept the almost packed Prince of Wales audience enthralled and at one point, recounting a story inspired by The Beatles' Eleanor Rigby about a dying priest named father McKenzie and his innocent and inspiring relationship with a young boy, you could have heard a pin drop in the almost churchlike reverence that Phinn's congregation were held in.

Phinn's appeal is he has never lost the ability to think and see life from a child's point of view.

The Secret Garden,
Birmingham Rep.

The final production before the Rep's two year closure due to construction of the city's new library lives up to the theatre's reputation for technical brilliance but lacks festive warmth.

Over long and weighed down by too many mediocre songs, this stodgy musical version of Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic Victorian tale about two upperclass children transformed by experiencing nature has great potential. Get rid of a third of the songs, lop half an hour off the 150 minute running time (with interval), and it could be special.

The acting and singing are superb. Amy Lennox is engaging as petulant Mary and James Gillan, as bedridden Colin, has the best song as he determines to leave his sickbed. Evelyn Hoskins is a treat as Martha the maid, her skipping song a highlight.

The revolving set of mansion and garden is excellent but, apart from the scene where it snows in the secret garden, festive sparkle and magic are in short supply.

The Secret Garden is at Birmingham Rep until January 8.

Leon Burakowski

you how to read and now you have come back to see if I am doing it right."

Phinn has a clarity and incisiveness which doesn't use smut, offensive behaviour or language and is a refreshing alternative to a lot of the sneering and cynicism around today.

And what is innuendo? According to one of Phinn's subjects it's an Italian suppository.

Danny Farragher

Spam!
Spam!
Spam!

Birmingham Royal Ballet, with music by Prokofiev, is on until Sunday. Birmingham Stage Company presents the children's fantasy The Firework Maker's Daughter, based on a story by author of The Golden Compass Philip Pullman, at the city's Old Rep theatre until January 28.

The Crescent Theatre Company present their version of TV favourite Dad's Army at Birmingham's Crescent Theatre from this Saturday to December 18.

Tonight (Thursday) Jeff Wayne's War of the Worlds at the NIA features Jason Donovan, Rhydian, Justin Hayward, a 36-piece string section and a giant Martian fighting machine.



Matthew Kelly is King Arthur

IT'S PANTO time... oh yes it is! Aladdin arrives at the Grand in Wolverhampton with Christopher Biggins as Widow Twankey, ventriloquist Paul Zerdin as Aladdin and an animated 3D genie. The show is on from Saturday to the end of January.

Meanwhile, over in Birmingham, Joan Collins and Nigel Havers as Queen and King Rat will be menacing Dick Whittington at Birmingham Hippodrome from December 18 to the end of January.

If you are looking for an alternative to traditional festive fare, Jodie Prenger, Matthew Kelly and Todd Carty are starring in Monty Python musical Spamalot at Birmingham's Alexandra Theatre until New Year's Day.

Preview performances of Matilda, Roald Dahl's story of a telekinetic schoolgirl who gets her revenge on a monstrous headmistress and a loveless family, has been getting standing ovations at Stratford where the Royal Shakespeare's colourful new production features songs by Aussie comedian Tim Minchin. It's on until January 30.

Birmingham Repertory Theatre brings childhood favourite, The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett, to the stage this Christmas, to January 8. David Bintley's lavish new production of the classic fairy tale Cinderella for



Amy Lennox as Mary Lennox

Sophie's choice of music

Ten years on from the release of what has just been named the most played radio tune of the past decade, Sophie Ellis Bextor is back on tour with fourth album, Straight to the Heart.

The married Mum of two has taken a seven year break from solo touring and promises an upbeat, dance floor filling return to her Groovejet, 'If this Ain't Love' best.

"My style of music has come full circle really - I started off with a dance hit and have worked with the likes of Freemasons and Calvin Harris for my latest album.

"The tour is high energy with an upbeat set, including all my old hits as well as the new material - everyone will be up on their feet."

Over the past few years Ms Bextor has toured with legendary acts Take That, George Michael and Elton John and is now happy

Sophie Ellis Bextor talks to ANNABEL MOTTAM about going back on tour.

to be the centre of attention again. "I have been really lucky to work with some amazing people and now come back in my own right - performing for a live audience and getting the crowds going."

The singer, songwriter and model has for the past two years also been enjoying success d-jing with her husband, The Feeling guitarist Richard Jones.

Sophie, who named her 2008 Olympic handover rendition of Carly Simon's Nobody Does it Better at Buckingham Palace as a career highlight, is to tour for three weeks beginning in Moscow. "I have a big Russian following and love going over, it's four hours on a plane but a different world

altogether. I'm looking forward to my return to Birmingham though; I've sung here many times before and love the different venues and atmosphere."

Sophie Ellis-Bextor is in concert at Birmingham O2 Academy 2, December 18.



Sophie Ellis-Bextor.

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TV *It's a Wonderful Life* (ABC, 8-9 p.m.) **PG-13** It's a classic, but this new version of the 1946 holiday classic is a little more modern. It's a good one.

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2017 **2016** **2015** **2014** **2013** **2012** **2011** **2010** **2009** **2008** **2007** **2006** **2005** **2004** **2003** **2002** **2001** **2000** **1999** **1998** **1997** **1996** **1995** **1994** **1993** **1992** **1991** **1990** **1989** **1988** **1987** **1986** **1985** **1984** **1983** **1982** **1981** **1980** **1979** **1978** **1977** **1976** **1975** **1974** **1973** **1972** **1971** **1970** **1969** **1968** **1967** **1966** **1965** **1964** **1963** **1962** **1961** **1960** **1959** **1958** **1957** **1956** **1955** **1954** **1953** **1952** **1951** **1950** **1949** **1948** **1947** **1946** **1945** **1944** **1943** **1942** **1941** **1940** **1939** **1938** **1937** **1936** **1935** **1934** **1933** **1932** **1931** **1930** **1929** **1928** **1927** **1926** **1925** **1924** **1923** **1922** **1921** **1920** **1919** **1918** **1917** **1916** **1915** **1914** **1913** **1912** **1911** **1910** **1909** **1908** **1907** **1906** **1905** **1904** **1903** **1902** **1901** **1900** **1899** **1898** **1897** **1896** **1895** **1894** **1893** **1892** **1891** **1890** **1889** **1888** **1887** **1886** **1885** **1884** **1883** **1882** **1881** **1880** **1879** **1878** **1877** **1876** **1875** **1874** **1873** **1872** **1871** **1870** **1869** **1868** **1867** **1866** **1865** **1864** **1863** **1862** **1861** **1860** **1859** **1858** **1857** **1856** **1855** **1854** **1853** **1852** **1851** **1850** **1849** **1848** **1847** **1846** **1845** **1844** **1843** **1842** **1841** **1840** **1839** **1838** **1837** **1836** **1835** **1834** **1833** **1832** **1831** **1830** **1829** **1828** **1827** **1826** **1825** **1824** **1823** **1822** **1821** **1820** **1819** **1818** **1817** **1816** **1815** **1814** **1813** **1812** **1811** **1810** **1809** **1808** **1807** **1806** **1805** **1804** **1803** **1802** **1801** **1800** **1799** **1798** **1797** **1796** **1795** **1794** **1793** **1792** **1791** **1790** **1789** **1788** **1787** **1786** **1785** **1784** **1783** **1782** **1781** **1780** **1779** **1778** **1777** **1776** **1775** **1774** **1773** **1772** **1771** **1770** **1769** **1768** **1767** **1766** **1765** **1764** **1763** **1762** **1761** **1760** **1759** **1758** **1757** **1756** **1755** **1754** **1753** **1752** **1751** **1750** **1749** **1748** **1747** **1746** **1745** **1744** **1743** **1742** **1741** **1740** **1739** **1738** **1737** **1736** **1735** **1734** **1733** **1732** **1731** **1730** **1729** **1728** **1727** **1726** **1725** **1724** **1723** **1722** **1721** **1720** **1719** **1718** **1717** **1716** **1715** **1714** **1713** **1712** **1711** **1710** **1709** **1708** **1707** **1706** **1705** **1704** **1703** **1702** **1701** **1700** **1699** **1698** **1697** **1696** **1695** **1694** **1693** **1692** **1691** **1690** **1689** **1688** **1687** **1686** **1685** **1684** **1683** **1682** **1681** **1680** **1679** **1678** **1677** **1676** **1675** **1674** **1673** **1672** **1671** **1670** **1669** **1668** **1667** **1666** **1665** **1664** **1663** **1662** **1661** **1660** **1659** **1658** **1657** **1656** **1655** **1654** **1653** **1652** **1651** **1650** **1649** **1648** **1647** **1646** **1645** **1644** **1643** **1642** **1641** **1640** **1639** **1638** **1637** **1636** **1635** **1634** **1633** **1632** **1631** **1630** **1629** **1628** **1627** **1626** **1625** **1624** **1623** **1622** **1621** **1620** **1619** **1618** **1617** **1616** **1615** **1614** **1613** **1612** **1611** **1610** **1609** **16**

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 Doctor (B) 5.99 *Michael* (M) *Clash* (B)

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Channel Five 6.00 *The Wright Stuff*.
8.45 *Micha Gosselin*, P. 11.15 *Rye News*, 11.59
CBS, N. 7.45 CBS, N. 15.15 *Neighbourhood*.
2.15 *Home and Away*, 2.45 *Maid in Moments*, (P)
2.30 *Music in Moments*, (P) 3.00 *Rye News*,
Channel Five, 3.30 *Contest Stars*, 4.00
Rye News Weather, 5.30 *Neighbourhood*, (P) 6.00
Home and Away, (P) 6.25 *Live from Studio Five*,
7.00 *Rye News at 7*, 7.30 *Live UEFA Europa*
20.09, *Live Football* introduces coverage of
the UEFA Europa League Group K match at
Anfield, 10.30 *Rinô: Second in Command* (2009)

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Channel Five 6.00 *Mighty Shark* 8.15 *The Wright Stuff*
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Sir Cliff Smith Investigates (R) **12.15** *Cliff Smith Investigates*
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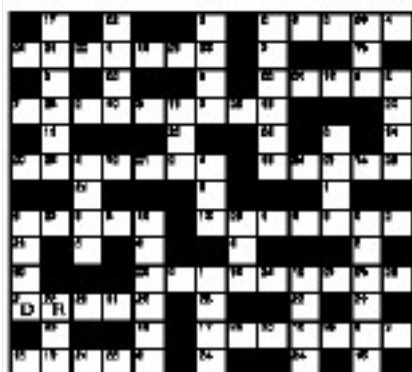
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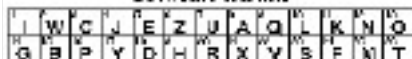
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Each number in the grid represents a different letter of the alphabet and every letter of the alphabet is used. Use the given letters to be right of the main grid to start you off.



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Double Crossword

Choose either grid or complete down in both
to the same grid.

Cryptic Clues:

Across

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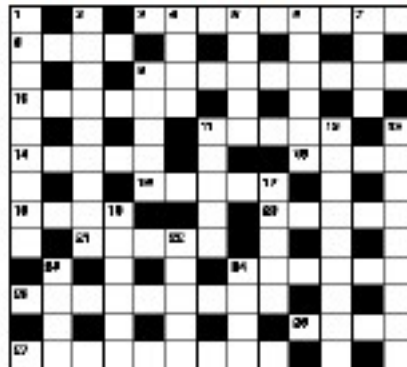
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LAST WEEK'S SOLUTION:

DOWN: 1. A small drink (4); 2. A small drink (4); 3. A small drink (4); 4. A small drink (4); 5. A small drink (4); 6. A small drink (4); 7. A small drink (4); 8. A small drink (4); 9. A small drink (4); 10. A small drink (4); 11. A small drink (4); 12. A small drink (4); 13. A small drink (4); 14. A small drink (4); 15. A small drink (4); 16. A small drink (4); 17. A small drink (4); 18. A small drink (4); 19. A small drink (4); 20. A small drink (4); 21. A small drink (4); 22. A small drink (4); 23. A small drink (4); 24. A small drink (4); 25. A small drink (4); 26. A small drink (4); 27. A small drink (4); 28. A small drink (4); 29. A small drink (4); 30. A small drink (4); 31. A small drink (4); 32. A small drink (4); 33. A small drink (4); 34. A small drink (4); 35. A small drink (4); 36. A small drink (4); 37. A small drink (4); 38. A small drink (4); 39. A small drink (4); 40. A small drink (4); 41. A small drink (4); 42. A small drink (4); 43. A small drink (4); 44. A small drink (4); 45. A small drink (4); 46. A small drink (4); 47. A small drink (4); 48. A small drink (4); 49. A small drink (4); 50. A small drink (4); 51. A small drink (4); 52. A small drink (4); 53. A small drink (4); 54. A small drink (4); 55. A small drink (4); 56. A small drink (4); 57. A small drink (4); 58. A small drink (4); 59. A small drink (4); 60. A small drink (4); 61. A small drink (4); 62. A small drink (4); 63. A small drink (4); 64. A small drink (4); 65. A small drink (4); 66. A small drink (4); 67. A small drink (4); 68. A small drink (4); 69. A small drink (4); 70. A small drink (4).

Sudoku

Fill in the grid
below so that
every column,
every row and
each of the 3x3
boxes contains
all the digits
from 1 to 9.

LAST WEEK'S

SOLUTION:

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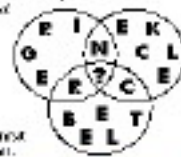
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Circlegram

Replace the question mark with a letter so that the words in the circle can be arranged to form words with a common theme. What are the three words, and the letter represented by the question mark?



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the pulse

Spectacular show, a 3D genie and lashings of Twankey panky

ONE of Britain's best loved celebrities, Christopher Biggins, is promising Wolverhampton a spectacular Grand pantomime this winter.

The actor and reality TV star is a veteran of 39 pantos but reckons Aladdin, which opens at the Grand on Saturday, could be the best yet.

"It is what I call a good old-fashioned London Palladium pantomime and what I mean by that is we have unbelievable scenery. I have been doing pantomime for 38 years and I haven't done one with scenery like this, with costumes that are so lavish and an amazing cast."

The show is a tweaked version of the production of Aladdin that broke box office records in Plymouth last year, in which veteran dame Biggins again played Widow Twankey.

"Everyone we did the panto with last year is coming back except for Aladdin and Wishee-Washee and we have put those roles together and have the amazing ventriloquist Paul Zerdin. He is brilliant."

Christopher Biggins talks to LEON BURAKOWSKI about panto, Porridge and paying the mortgage.

"And we have a 3D genie... oh yes we do!" Cue familiar booming laugh.

"When I saw it in rehearsal I was absolutely blown away. It cost a lot of money and the running costs are huge for it. When Abanazar and Aladdin are in the cave with this extraordinary genie, you can see the kids trying to catch the spiders. It is phenomenal."

"It is going to be a spectacular pantomime, one of the most spectacular Wolverhampton has staged."

Biggins also has a key role in the region's other big pantomime this winter but not on stage... it was he who encouraged his close friend Joan Collins to make her panto debut this year, playing Queen Rat in Dick Whittington at Birmingham Hippodrome.

"We were talking about the fact a job had fallen

through over Christmas and New Year and I said come on Joan why don't you do a pantomime. I told her she would be great. I think I sowed the seed. Sadly I don't think I will be able to see her perform but I know she's going to be fantastic. We will get together for dinner on our night off."

But another one of his celebrity pals will be calling in at the Grand for one of the performances.

Career

"Cilla (Black) will be coming to Wolverhampton because she is not doing a pantomime herself this year," said the star, whose early roles included such TV classics as the drama I, Claudius, and prison sitcom Porridge with Ronnie Barker.

"I am very lucky, I have a very varied, interesting and good career. I loved Nero in I, Claudius, and Ozzy Whitworth in Poldark from my straight acting years. I loved Surprise Surprise with Cilla, I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here and Come Dine With Me."

"As long as I can plod along and pay the mortgage - well, thankfully, I paid that off last year - I am happy to be able to live a full life."

He loves art - he once bought a Hockney for £150 that's now worth £10,000 - and technology, his most treasured possession is his iPhone, he says, and he enjoys holidays in Mauritius.

But he always makes sure he is available for the panto season. "I love the audience participation and I love to make an audience laugh and that it is for everyone, from three to 93."

"When I did the 'Jungle' I didn't do a pantomime that year, so I went and saw 15 pantomimes. I went all over the country. It was wonderful."

Aladdin is staged at the Grand from December 11 to January 30.



Christopher Biggins

Glenn communing with the Black Country

GOOD news for fans of Anglo-American rock supergroup Black Country Communion - who perform their debut UK gig at Wolverhampton Civic Hall on December 29 - frontman Glenn Hughes is already working on songs for their second album.

The former Deep Purple and Trapeze singer, who hails from Cannock, revealed that BCC is no "one-off" project when talking to The Chronicle from his hillside home in sunny California, which he shares with wife Gabrielle. "I love England but not the cold and the rain," he admitted.

The band features Hughes on vocals and bass guitar, drummer Jason Bonham, the Dudley-born son of the late Led Zeppelin sticksman John Bonham, with Americans - guitarist Joe Bonamassa and keyboardist Derek Sherinian. Their self-titled debut album - a slab of classic bluesy hard rock - has been a big success.

"I have prepared a lot of songs, we've probably got three-quarters of the next album," said Glenn.

"Joe (Bonamassa) and Kevin (Shirley, the producer) both live in LA and we get together at Kevin's studio in Malibu. It's very cohesive and organic. I bring my songs, Joe brings his and we finish each other's songs. I have a studio at home and sometimes I have to remind myself to get out of there," said Glenn, a former rock wildman who has cleaned up his act.

Thankful

"Songwriting is what I do and I do it every day, even on Christmas Day. I am known as a rock singer, and appreciate and am thankful for that but primarily I am a songwriter. Those creative urges get stronger the further I get from the days when I would get high or drunk."

He reckons it's fate that has brought the four of them together in a band after years of friendship, a lifetime's worth when it comes to Jason Bonham.

"I knew Jason before he knew me," said Glenn. "I remember when he was a two-year-old, John (his

father) was a friend of mine and I was like an uncle to Jason. He's my friend's son and I love him to bits."

"I believe in fate and in karma. I had a dream which told me I was going to be in a rock 'n' roll band again. I was all set to make another funky Glenn record but I put the brakes on... and three weeks later I'm in this band Black Country Communion."

The name references Glenn and Jason's roots in the West Midlands.

"It was very important to me and to Jason that the first gig be at Wolverhampton Civic Hall. That really means something to us. It's a great rock venue in the heart of the Black Country. We've got to play where the name came from."

"I've played the venue about ten times but not in recent years. I played there with my first band The News in 1968, then in '69 with Finders Keepers, then several times with Trapeze and then with Deep Purple a couple of times." Just before heading down the canyon to record at Malibu, Glenn signed off with a cheery "Up the Wolves!"



From left, Glenn Hughes with Jason Bonham on drums and Joe Bonamassa.

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The top property guide for Walsall, Brownhills, Aldridge, Willenhall and Bloxwich

Former shop with planning permits

A substantial and fully modernised period property, formerly a shop with commercial premises included, has come on to the market in Shelfield, Walsall.

Number 116 Lichfield Road, a substantial three-bedroom double-fronted detached family home, has planning permission for two semi-detached houses at the rear. Marrion & Co estate agents are marketing this property for £375,000.

This gas centrally heated and uPVC double-glazed house is thought to date from the late Victorian period and is close to a variety of local amenities, including public transport links, schools for all ages and shops at nearby Walsall, Aldridge, Bloxwich and Brownhills.

A front door opens into an entrance lobby, which leads to a 13ft 3in x 10ft 8in dining room

with a coved ceiling and useful built-in cupboard. An archway leads through to an extended and comprehensively equipped kitchen/breakfast room fitted with a range of beech effect base and wall units, rolled-edge work-surfaces, single drainer sink unit with mixer tap, space for a free-standing gas or electric cooker, built-in extractor hood, large breakfast bar, coved ceiling, ceramic tiled floor and plumbing for a dishwasher, washing machine and tumble dryer.

Matching

Leading off is a utility with matching work-surfaces that connects to the rear parking area.

The 24ft 7in x 14ft 2in through lounge has a coved ceiling, picture rail, useful understairs storage, feature chimney breast wall with arched recessed illuminated niches and ornate Victorian fireplace with a raised hearth, brass offender and inset real flame-effect gas fire.

Also downstairs is a study with

laminated flooring and wall panelling and a door leading to the rear parking area.

Upstairs, there are three bedrooms, one with built-in wardrobes and another with access to the boarded loft space, which has skylights, lighting and power. The family bathroom has a Champagne coloured suite comprising a pedestal wash basin, WC, bath with seat and electric shower.

Outside, there's around 2,000 square feet of workshop accommodation, suitable for a variety of commercial applications with a side gated trades entrance and separate vehicular access and yard. There are three brick-built workshops as well as a part-brick uPVC double-glazed conservatory/office and a further first-floor workshop. Planning permission has already been granted for the erection of two semi-detached houses.

For more information or to arrange a viewing, call 01922 404446.



Marrion & Co estate agent is marketing the sale of 116 Lichfield Road in Walsall for offers in the region of £375,000. Call 01922 404446.

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SHOWHOME LAUNCH TO PROVIDE CENTREPIECE FOR PART EXCHANGE WEEKEND

THERE WILL be plenty to see at The Bridles on Bell Lane in Bloxwich this weekend for anyone struggling to sell their current property.

Leading housebuilder Barratt West Midlands is hosting a part exchange event that will be marked by the launch of a stunning new Sapphire show home – a gem of a property that will be the jewel in the crown for the weekend's activities.

The special event will take place between 10am and 5pm over this weekend, 11th and 12th December, where interested buyers will have the chance to speak to Barratt's experienced sales advisers about the many benefits of using its popular Part Exchange scheme.

Under the scheme, Barratt buys your existing home, leaving you free to buy a new one, offering a hassle-free way to move home with no estate agent fees to pay, saving you thousands.

Michelle Barnsley, Part-Exchange Manager for Barratt West Midlands

who will also be available on the day to answer, "Whether it is the first or fifth time, moving home can be confusing and time consuming. But with our home-exchange schemes, buyers can sit back and relax whilst we do all the hard work."

"With the schemes we arrange two independent valuations of the existing property and best of all we also take care of any fees usually associated with an estate agent, which can all add up."

"Whether it is the first or fifth time, moving home can be confusing and time consuming. But with our home-exchange schemes, buyers can sit back and relax whilst we do all the hard work"

"This weekend, we are inviting home hunters to come along to The Bridles where not only can they speak to our sales advisers, but a local estate agent will also be on hand to talk about selling their existing home."

"What's more, we are offering a free valuation of the existing property for anyone who books an appointment

over the weekend.

"This is an unmissable opportunity to see thousands of pounds whilst moving to a brand new Barratt home, so I am urging anyone thinking of buying to come along this weekend to find out more."

The event will be crowned by the launch of a brand new show home: a four-bedroom Sapphire-style property that has been stylishly designed and decorated to give

made a lot easier when they are able to see the houses before they buy.

"So it's great to be able to invite everyone to come and see our new show home as part of our part-exchange weekend. It's always fantastic to give homebuyers a little vision of how their home could take shape, and we're really looking forward to showing people not only how they could make their move easier, but also how their home could look too."

The Bridles offers a selection of one-bedroom apartments priced from £93,950 and two-, three- and four-bedroom houses priced from £144,950. For more information, please contact the sales office on 01822 497 919 open daily from 10am to 5pm. Alternatively, please call the sales hotline on 0844 811 9933 open seven days a week from 9am to 5pm or log on to www.barratthomes.co.uk/TheBridles.



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Number 60 Kewstoke Road is on the market with Fraser Wood estate agent for offers in the region of £214,950.



The refitted kitchen has a stylish range of units with integrated cooker and hood.



The neutral decor in the lounge creates a stylish look with a large window.

Internal inspection of a spacious four-bedroomed detached family home in Willenhall is being strongly recommended by the selling agent.

estate agents and is well served by local shopping facilities, schools for all ages and transport links to the centres of Willenhall, Wolverhampton and Willenhall.

Storage

Number 60 Kewstoke Road has a convenient location, gas fired central heating, double glazing, expensively fitted kitchen, refitted bathroom, gardens and a detached garage with off-road parking.

An entrance porch with a double-glazed front door leads to a reception hall with wood flooring, useful understairs storage and guest cloakroom.

Finished to a high standard, the house is on the market for £214,950 through Fraser Wood

The 12ft 11in x 14ft 5in lounge has a fire surround with a gas fire, wood flooring and an archway leading to the dining room, which features wood laminate flooring and a double-glazed sliding patio door to the

rear garden. In the well-appointed fitted kitchen, there's a range of wall and base units, display cabinets with under-lighting, granite work-surfaces, an inset sink and integral microwave, double oven, hob, extractor, dishwasher, washing machine and fridge/freezer.

The refitted bathroom has a modern white suite comprising a P-shaped panelled bath with shower above, cabinet wash basin, WC and ceramic tiled walls and floor.

Driveway

Upstairs, the master bedroom has two built-in wardrobes, bedside cabinets and a vanity area with additional storage space.

Outside, the house is approached via a lawned foregarden with side concrete driveway providing off-road parking and leading to the rear garage, which has an up-and-over door. Double opening gates lead to the lawned rear garden.

The second bedroom has wood laminate flooring and four wardrobes with sliding mirrored doors, while the remaining two bedrooms have

For more information or to arrange a viewing, contact the agent on 01902 367367.

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Smooth – and with all the toys

AUDI'S new A6 Saloon has been redesigned from the ground up and benefits from the brand's most advanced lightweight construction techniques.

With weight kept in check through aluminium and steel composite construction, despite enhanced equipment levels, the new A6 will deliver dynamically and in terms of efficiency – with 57mpg-plus economy potential and CO2 outputs of as little as 129g/km.

It also offers executive 'toys' such as self parking, thermal imaging cameras and massaging seats.

Aluminium

UK A6 orders will be taken from January and first deliveries will begin in the spring. Prices will start at £30,145 on the road.

Aluminium and high-tech steels make up much of the reworked body of the new A6.

Combining the two materials reduces the shell weight by around 15 per cent, and enables the A6 TDI to tip the scales at a relatively modest 1,575kg.

Hi-tech design methods and materials ensure extremely low interior noise levels, while precision tuning of all components



The new Audi A6 will be 15 per cent lighter than the old model and will feature a raft of premium features and gadgets

and systematic hydraulic damping in the axle and drivetrain bearings provides excellent refinement.

The 2.0-litre TDI 177PS, 3.0-litre TDI 204PS, 3.0-litre TDI 245PS and 3.0-litre TFSI 300PS units all make use of advanced direct injection technology for the leanest possible fuel burn rate, and work in conjunction with important tech-

nologies from the brand's modular efficiency platform – the start-stop system, the energy recovery system and the innovative thermal management concept.

As a result, fuel economy has improved by up to 19 per cent compared to the previous model.

The drivetrain choice, based on the engine version, will include a manual six-

speed transmission or continuously variable multitronic CVT for front-wheel-drive models, and the new seven-speed 'S tronic' twin-clutch transmission for quattros.

Each unit features a wide gear-ratio spread which makes a significant contribution to overall efficiency.

New energy-efficient electromechanical power steering, in conjunction with the



The Audi's cabin is luxurious and classy

lightweight suspension set-up, will impart even greater precision and composure.

Comfort is highly prized in the executive saloon class. The A6 has a more refined ride than can, as before, cosset more completely if the option of adaptive air suspension with controlled damping is chosen.

The car's low, sleek roofline lends it a purposeful air which its optional LED headlights and LED daytime running lights emphasise further.

The roomy interior with its cocooning 'wraparound' dash panel combines the latest Audi design language with the most salient technological advances.

Supportive seats upholstered as standard in Milano leather position occupants perfectly in relation to the cabin's focal point, the Multi Media Inter-

face with its 6.5-inch retractable monitor and large central control knob.

MMI provides easy and intuitive access to the high quality audio system, the Bluetooth phone interface and the SD card-based navigation system – a much prized asset which, uniquely in the premium sector at this level, is standard in the A6.

An eight-inch monitor and fingertip sensitive touch pad are available to upgrade MMI to MMI Touch.

The system's touch pad enables characters to be 'drawn' by the driver using an index finger for navigation or telephone data entry. As well as ultra-intelligent 3D navigation mapping, the new MMI Touch system can store audio tracks and telephone data.

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Nissan president Carlos Ghosn said:

The motor develops a power output of 109PS and 280Nm of torque, enough for a

The first UK customers will get their Leafs in March. The zero-emission car is currently being built in Japan, but will also be produced – along with its batteries – at Nissan's giant Sunderland plant from early 2013.

The new Ford C-Max, above, and Grand C-Max have been awarded top marks for safety features.

Gunnar Herrmann, Ford's global medium car vehicle line director, said: "Crash test ratings are an important factor when designing and engineering our vehicles and we're delighted that Euro NCAP has recognised that both the new C-Max and Grand C-Max models offer excellent protection."

In total, 53 per cent of the body shell in each vehicle is made from high-strength steels, compared to 45 per cent in the previous generation vehicle. Ultra-tough Boron steel is used in the A-pillars, B-pillars, rocker panels and door reinforcement beams help to create a passenger cell that manages deformation in a crash—including frontal impacts, side impacts and side pole impacts. High strength dual-phase steel is

Driver safety is improved thanks to Ford's new steering column that reduces loads on the occupant's head and chest by moving away from the driver in high speed frontal impacts.


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Stop Houses, Friar Canal Bridge and the old stables on the Cannock extension.

This week's pictures come from one of our regular contributors Mr Alex Bailey of Pelsall who has themed his pictures from around the borough this time on reflected images.



Houses on Lichfield Road reflected in the Moat Pool.



The junction bridge mirrored in the canal on Pelsall Common.



Swans reflected in the water of Pelsall's new lake.

Snapshots of life in the borough

Are you a snazzy snapper, a lord of the lens or diva of the digital print? Think you can do better than these pictures, if you can why not share your snaps of the borough?

There is no limit on the age or the subject all we ask is that they be as sharp and clear as possible and must be of reasonable quality for publication and of course feature some area or aspect of Walsall and its life.

Send them in with your name, address and contact number and a brief description of what the picture shows.

Also we would like to hear about any interesting tales or stories attached to the photograph. Send them in either as a hard copy or electronically and we will do the rest. So get those cameras snapping, dig out those dusty old albums and send them to: **Snappers Claim to Frame, Walsall Chronicle, Queen Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 1ES** or email them to walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk.



A sunrise reflected also on Pelsall New Lake.



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SPORT

thechronicle

TABLE TENNIS

Half-way stage and Vic Park unbeaten

DIVISION 1

At the half-way stage of the season, champions Vic Park A remain unbeaten, with Andy Dixon heading for the Most Wins trophy, closely followed by "Shammy" from Wood Green B and Paul "Wozza" Warrilow from Wood Green A, who have also played very well so far.

"Shammy" lost to Colin Hammond in his teams 8-2 win over Wyrley A, a similar score for Wyrley in their loss to leaders Vic A.

The battle for second place continues at a pace with Wood Green B, Wood Green A, and Vic Park C looking the most likely suspects,

with all to play for in the second half of the season.

At the bottom, Wood Green C despite being competitive wherever they play, look doomed to relegation, recently losing 9-1 to Wood Green B, 7-3 to Vic Park B and 9-1 to Wyrley A whilst in mid table, Wyrley B beat Albrighton 6-4 with Tom Murray outstanding for them winning 3.

Pete Fowell won 2 for the losers.

Most wins: Andy Dixon - (Vic Park A) - Played 27 Won 26

"Shammy" - (Wood Green B) - Played 30 Won 26

Paul Warrilow - (Wood Green A) - Played 24 Won 21

	Played	Won	Drawn	Lost	For	Against	Pts
Vic Park A	9	9	0	0	82	8	82
Wood Green B	10	7	1	2	67	33	67
Wood Green A	8	5	0	2	54	26	54
Vic Park C	9	6	1	2	52	38	52
Wyrley B	9	4	1	4	43	47	43
Albrighton	9	4	1	4	42	48	42
Vic Park B	9	3	2	4	40	50	40
Wyrley A	10	2	0	8	31	69	31
Cheslyn Hay A	9	2	0	7	23	67	23
Wood Green C	8	0	0	8	16	64	16

NEWS

Race ace Dean gets a chance to drive F1 car



Dean Smith

A RACING driver from Wolverhampton has got his Formula One career off the starting grid after putting a McLaren Mercedes through its paces at the home of British racing, Silverstone.

Not only did Dean Smith, aged 22, realise a lifelong ambition during the 18-lap stint, he also thoroughly impressed the watching McLaren management. Dean was said to have delivered an assured performance on his big debut and now plans to knuckle down in the feeder GP3 series in order to win a permanent place on the F1 circuit.

He earned the opportunity to test with McLaren by winning the Autosport BRDC award in 2009. The title recognises young racing talent in the UK and previous winners have included F1 stars David Coulthard, Anthony Davidson and Jenson Button.

Last year Dean, a former student at Ellowes Hall Sports College, Dudley, won the Formula Renault championship and he was Formula BMW champion in 2005. Dean said his test session in a MP4-23 McLaren Mercedes - the car raced in the 2008 F1 World Championship - had made him hungrier than ever to fight his way to the pinnacle of motor racing.

Achieved

"Driving a Formula One car is something I've wanted to do all my life and to have actually achieved that aim, thanks to everyone at Vodafone McLaren Mercedes and the McLaren Autosport BRDC Award, really is a dream come true," he said.

"When I went out on track for the first time it was pretty wet but that wasn't a problem, everything felt very comfortable and quite natural actually."

"The McLaren Mercedes is absolutely awesome. I feel so privileged to have had the opportunity to test the car. I'm really pleased with the job I did and the team told me how impressed they were too so it couldn't have gone any better."

Dean is now looking for sponsorship to help him compete in GP3 again next year after finishing seventh in this year's championship - the highest placed Briton.

LEISURE LEAGUES

Des United crushing the Underdogs

WALSALL 6-A-SIDE FOOTBALL

Mid-table Bloxwich Youth eased out the 4 Nations 4-2 and made it eight points from eight games in the Walsall Monday 6 a side league. Des United were most impressive performers in division one, crushing mid-table Underdogs 5-0 as Stu Hubbard found his best form, while Adam Lewis could say likewise as his side, Bayer Neverlusen won the mid-table clash with Trotters FC 2-0 in division two.

Green Machine moved into a challenging position in the Brierley Hill 6 a side league after James Stockhart was instrumental in a fine 7-1 dismissal of FC Inter Me Lamberetta. Games were tighter in division one, but Rob Peel FC did leave themselves right in the title hunt as they squeaked home 1-0 against Pass Masters.

Anyone who wants to join the 6-a-side football leagues in Walsall and Brierley Hill can ring 0845 230 2340 or visit www.leisureleagues.net

Team	Played	Goal Diff	Points
Jollysaddler	8	14	15
Vention Wolves	8	10	12
CHAF C	8	7	10
Copice	8	3	9
Bloxwich Youth	8	2	8
AVFC 06	8	0	8
Walsall Allstars	8	-3	7
French & Dean			
Saunders	8	-7	5
The 4 Nations	8	-9	4
Cresswell Rov	8	-17	2

Team Name	Played	Goal Diff	Points
FC Basil Fawley	8	16	15
Des United	8	27	14
FC Oldhouse	8	8	11
Scalers F.C.	8	6	8
FC vengeance	8	3	8
Underdogs	8	1	8
Bloxwich Beasts	8	-2	7
God Squad	8	-15	6
Football United	8	-22	3
surreal madrid	8	-22	0

Team Name	Played	Goal Diff	Points
Wed-field Boys	8	21	15
The Swifts	8	18	12
Miami dolphins	8	16	12
bayer neverlusen	8	6	10
Trotters FC	8	-3	8
Borussia Teeth	8	-5	8
5 Fields	8	-7	7
wii not fit	8	-17	5
Big Add's Lad's	8	-12	2
Ashmore Lk FC	8	-17	1

Martial artists give exams right belting

walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

Six martial artists from a karate club near Walsall are celebrating after passing their grades to earn black belts or improve their ranking.

The black belt examinations were held on December 5 at the Midland Shotokan Karate federation (MSKF) head dojo in Stafford.

The grading was conducted by Sensei Paul Smith 5th dan who is the chief instructor of the MSKF. Richard Hill aged 25 from Great Wyrley who passed his grading and was awarded the rank of 3rd Dan.

The karate exponents from Elite Shotokan Karate Club, Essington who passed their grades were Sam Evans, aged 25, from Cheslyn Hay who was awarded a 2nd Dan black belt; David Sanders, 24, from Cannock who won his 1st Dan; Joshua Devey, 11, from Great Wyrley also earned his 1st dan; Ryan Williams, 11, from Essington earned his 1st dan black belt and Tom Williamson, 10, from Great Wyrley was awarded his 1st dan.

Chief instructor at the club David Hill, said: "The grading was both physically and mentally demanding and lasted for three hours."

"All principles of karate were part of the exam including the 1st dans having to perform 14 katas, which are set routines, consecutively, 2nd dans performing 16 katas and 3rd dans performing 22."

Sparring

"The students also had to endure a tough sparring category to clinch their grades. This really is a fantastic achievement for all of them, it has taken many years of hard work and dedication to the sport of karate and they all fully deserve their new grades."

"Ryan, Josh and Tom will be among some of the youngest black belts in the MSKF and really did themselves proud on the day," he added.

Richard Hill finished top student on the day with an excellent pass mark of 90 per cent. Richard is now focusing on a training programme for the EKF England fighting team with selections in february next year.

Mr Hill, said: "This really is such an achievement for all of them and I think this is something that people across the region should know especially as Josh, Ryan, Tom and David have been training for five years, sam has been training for 10 years and Richard has been training for 20 years."

"I was extremely proud of them and they all performed brilliantly - they were a credit to the Elite Karate Club."

Sensei Paul Smith said on the day how impressed he was with the standard he had seen from my students and said they all have a bright future ahead of them in the sport.

Elite Shotokan Karate Club train at Essington Community Centre, Hobnack Road every wednesday and friday and anyone interested in joining can contact 07890 646 921 and they can check out the website at www.karateelite.co.uk.



Back row from left, Sensei, Paul Smith 5th Dan - Head of MSKF, David Sanders, Sam Evans, Richard Hill, David Hill 3rd Dan - Chief Instructor Elite Karate club. Front row from left Joshua Devey, Ryan Williams and Tom Williamson with their grades.

JUNIORS



Red Star Raiders.

Red Star top of division

RED STAR RAIDERS 2 SILVERDALE JFC 0

The Raiders have topped the 1st division league for the first time this season by beating the current league leaders Silverdale in a hard fought encounter.

The game started lively with a lot of positive football from both teams causing early chances.

The first goal came from a neat back heel pass from Reece Allen that found Reece Nunne who went on to score for

the Raiders, 1-0. Shortly after the restart The Raiders were pressing for a second goal and Silverdale for an equaliser, Silverdale had a penalty appeal turned down and in return a decent shot from Reece Allen for the raiders was saved by the Silverdale keeper.

The second goal came courtesy of Jordan Banister who slotted home neatly following a decent ball through from Reece Allen again, 2-0.

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MARTIAL
ARTISTS GIVE
EXAMS A
BELTING
Page 51



Time to get nasty for us to survive – says Walker

Jimmy Walker has told Walsall's flops they must ditch their soft side and get nasty if they want to survive.

The keeper admitted the Saddlers must give each other an ear-bashing after performances and results left them bottom of League One.

Saturday's game with Oldham was postponed due to a frozen pitch which kept them seven points from safety.

Club legend Walker insisted the players must dish out the ralloppings to start a revival.

"You have to get nasty with yourself and your team-mates," he said.

"Sometimes if your team-mate isn't doing it right, then you're told. I've been brought up in teams where, if you're not doing it right, then you're told."

"Sometimes there's not enough of that and you need to be mature and understand it because we all want to win the games."

"You don't win anything without being nasty and we've got to do that if we want to win games. Losing becomes a habit in the end and at the minute we're on a run which isn't so nice and we have to break that habit."



Jimmy Walker

Backing

The Saddlers have won just three of their last 19 games in all competitions and have come under fire from fans for not backing up their words with performances.

They go to second-placed Charlton on Sunday bidding to upset the odds and Walker, who returned to the club in October, knows they have to start getting results.

"Talk is cheap, we have to turn it around and we have to do it as soon as possible," said the 37-year-old, who has made 484 appearances in two spells for Walsall.

"The league is massive for us now, we have a week to work on things and we have to stand up and be counted, every one of us."

And the stopper insisted the players are hurting from a season which has seen protests against the manager and board and left the club fighting relegation.

"I'm a fan first and foremost, there's no-one more disappointed than me and the players. There's nothing worse than losing games," he said.

"We can work on the bit of quality. We're not that far away, I've said that all along, it's just very disappointing."

Bonser stablising club, says boss

Walsall boss Chris Hutchings has hailed chairman Jeff Bonser for keeping the club stable.

The Saddlers' accounts, released last week, show the owner pumped £546,000 into the club to help them make a £5,000 profit in the last financial year.

Bonser is under continuous fire from fans angry at his running of the club – especially with Walsall bottom of League One.

The Saddlers' game with Oldham was called off due to a frozen pitch to give them a break from their disgruntled supporters.

But Hutchings, under extreme pressure himself, insisted Bonser and the board are doing their best to keep the Saddlers on an even keel. "This club is run in the black and

the accounts have show that. That's a credit to everyone at this football club," he said.

"The board do a great job and people don't realise what they do. We have a budget, we get on with it and we deal with it."

Administration

"Sometimes you might think 'we need more' but if the money isn't there we can't do it. If you want a rise and don't have any more money in the bank you don't get a rise."

It was the fifth successive year the Saddlers have posted a profit, although critics point to the loan Bonser gave the club and the rent they pay on the Banks's Stadium and other facilities. The chairman has

always insisted the Saddlers will never fall into administration during his tenure – a spectre facing many of their League One rivals.

Hutchings pointed to Plymouth and Sheffield Wednesday – who have both been served with winding-up orders recently – as prime examples of clubs struggling to survive during difficult times.

And Hutchings said Bonser's prudent stance is the right way to go in the current financial climate.

"The board have done fantastically well, we can't argue that fact. We're grateful for what they do because we know the wages are going to be there week in, week out," said the under-fire manager.

walsallchronicle@expressandstar.co.uk

Walsall have confirmed they will not renew the loans of Barnsley duo Martin Devaney and Liam Dickinson.

Their deals expired last week and the Saddlers have decided against keeping them for another month.

Their last game was due to be against Oldham – but that was frozen off – and boss Chris Hutchings praised the duo for their contributions.

He said: "I'd like to thank Martin and Liam for their efforts and I would also like to thank Barnsley for allowing them to come to us. I wish the boys all the best."

Hutchings admitted he faced a tough decision on whether to gamble on Devaney's fitness because the Saddlers couldn't afford to keep him if he was sidelined.

Hutchings said: "There's no point in taking people on loan if they are going to be injured, they cost us money and we need people who are going to be out there playing," said the boss, who must also decide whether to keep Devaney's Barnsley team-mate Liam Dickinson.

"It's a gamble if you sign any player, you can't legislate for them pulling a hamstring or doing their ankle, injuries happen."

Discomfort

"He's still got his injury and feeling discomfort and it's a disappointment from his and our point of view. We took him for a second month and we'd hoped he'd be OK for the Cup game at Torquay but he had a setback."

The winger was injured for the whole of his second month after suffering a hamstring injury in the 1-1 FA Cup draw at Fleetwood in November.

He had made a big impact during his first spell, making four appearances and scoring once, in the 1-1 draw at Dagenham and Redbridge in October.

Devaney has been frozen out at Barnsley by boss Mark Robins and had been keen to stay at Walsall. Dickinson followed his Oakwell colleague to the Banks's Stadium last month but failed to score in seven outings.

His departure leaves the Saddlers short up front with Reuben Reid and Jon Macken out for at least two weeks with hamstring and calf injuries.

The 30-year-old has made five appearances, scoring once, since his October switch and had been keen to stay as he is out of Mark Robins' plan at Oakwell.

Skipper Darren Byfield is also sidelined with a long-term knee problem.

Hutchings handed Will Grigg his first start in last weekend's 1-0 FA Cup defeat at Torquay and the 19-year-old is likely to spearhead the Saddlers' attack before Reid and Macken return.

Alex Nicholls and Steve Jones are two likely options to partner him.

The sign says it all as Oldham game is frozen out



Paul Mason, right, assistant groundsman at the Banks's, is helped by volunteers as they battled in vain to make the pitch playable.

The Banks's Stadium pitch is covered but under a layer of snow.

Walsall's game with Oldham was called off after sub-zero temperatures froze the Banks's Stadium pitch.

The Saddlers were due to host the Latics in League One but freezing conditions have hit the football programme across the country.

Local referee Oliver Langford postponed the game with little hope of the grass thawing out.

The Banks's pitch had been protected all week but with temperatures plunging to minus 8C they were unable to keep it playable. The club are also wary of ruining

the surface after extensive efforts to get games on last season damaged the pitch.

It made it almost unplayable with sand patches covering the grass following the cold snap last term.

Chaos

Walsall didn't play between December 19, 2009, and January 16 this year with the weather causing chaos in the Football League. The break saw the Saddlers lose momentum and fall away from the play-off spots to finish 10th. Now, they are bottom of the table and need to play but the team have even been struggling to train prop-

erly. Their base at Essington has frozen over and even the artificial surface at the Banks's Stadium has been affected.

Boss Chris Hutchings said: "We trained outside on Tuesday but even the artificial pitch has frozen over now so we're trying to get some salt on it."

And the manager was disappointed the game is off but knows it is out of his hands. He said: "You always need to play games, that's what you train all week for."

"In any position you want to play games, you don't want to have breaks but the elements are there and we can't do anything about it."

Ricketts accused of attacking woman



Michael Ricketts.

Former Walsall and England striker Michael Ricketts is to appear in court accused of assaulting a woman outside a restaurant.

Ricketts has been charged with common assault after the female suffered a black eye following an alleged altercation in Greater Manchester.

The 32-year-old from Four Oaks, Birmingham, is due to appear at Trafford Magistrates Court on December 13. Ricketts

started his career at Walsall before moving onto Bolton and winning an England cap. He also played for Middlesbrough and Leeds and returned to the Saddlers for a second spell in 2008.

Greater Manchester Police spokesman Stefan Jarmolowicz said: "Michael Ricketts, of

Four Oaks, Birmingham, was charged with section 39 assault and is due to appear before Trafford magistrates on December 13, 2010. At about 7.45pm on Saturday, December 4, an officer on patrol on Ashley Road, Hale, came across a woman being assaulted outside a restaurant."

The Walsall Chronicle, a Midland News Association Ltd publication, printed by the company at Kettley, Telford, Shropshire. Thursday, December 9, 2010.

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Our advice on how to keep warm and keep well this winter - see inside

Christmas crackers - our handy health guide to the Christmas holiday - see back page

Take good care this winter

Be prepared for the cold weather

There's more to feeling "under the weather" than most people realise. Cold and wintry conditions can cause severe illness and, in the worst cases, people can die.

Severe cold snaps like those we suffered last winter can have a big effect on everyday life - especially for those people who are already vulnerable because of their age, health or disability.

Stay one step ahead of the weather by checking the forecasts regularly. Severe weather warnings are issued on the Met Office website at www.metoffice.gov.uk or you can ring the Customer Centre on 0870 900 0100 (calls cost a maximum of 7.5p a minute).



Get a free seasonal flu jab

In an average year, 15 out of every 100 people in Walsall will get seasonal flu. You are more at risk if you are have a long term health condition, are older or are pregnant.

You can protect yourself against seasonal flu by getting an annual jab. You can get a free jab if you:

- are aged 65 or over
- are pregnant
- have serious heart, lung or kidney disease
- have a weak immune system caused by disease or medical treatment
- have had a stroke or TIA (transient ischaemic attack)

Speak to your GP or local community pharmacist if you think you might qualify for a free jab.

If you don't qualify for a free flu jab, you could always pay for one yourself. It can cost as little as £10.

Flu Jab →

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If you are 65 or over or have a chronic illness contact your GP now for an appointment.

NHS
Walsall

Avoid catching colds and flu

Colds and flu spread very easily. Young children in particular can be at risk because their immune system is still developing.

Please follow these simple measures to reduce the risk of catching and spreading infection:

- use paper tissues instead of cotton handkerchiefs
- always cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
- throw away used tissues as soon as possible
- wash your hands regularly and thoroughly using soap and warm water
- make sure your medicine cabinet at home is stocked up with over-the-counter cough and cold remedies
- drink more low fat milk and eat more low fat yoghurt to boost your immune system

Heat your home effectively and safely

Some of these energy-saving tips may seem obvious but they can make a big difference to your bills.

- Set your heating to the right temperature. Your living room should be between 18 - 21 degrees centigrade with the rest of your home at least 16 degrees centigrade. Above this and you will be wasting money. Below this and you may be risking your health
- Set your heating to come on just before you get up and switch off just after you've gone to bed.
- If it's very cold, set your heating to come on earlier and switch off later
- If you have open fires, make sure they are properly ventilated
- If you use a fire or a heater in your bedroom at night, always keep a window and a door open

Help to pay your heating bills

There are grants, benefits and sources of advice available to you to make your home more energy efficient, improve your heating and keep you bills as low as possible.

The Winter Fuel Payment is a tax free benefit designed to help you pay your domestic bills. It's payable to people born before 5 July 1950 and is worth up to £400 depending on your age, whether you live alone and what benefits you are already getting.

For more details, call 08459 151515 weekdays from 8.30am to 4.30pm or visit www.directgov.uk/winterfuel

Christmas Crackers

Your handy health planner for the holiday

If you are on a prescription, make sure you have enough supplies to last you through the holiday.

Stock up on essentials like Paracetamol, cough medicines, rehydration mixtures, indigestion tablets, plasters, bandages, antiseptic cream and tissues.

Check your local pharmacy opening hours - including who supplies emergency morning after contraception - by calling NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or visiting www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Walsall Walk-In Health Centre in Market Square, Digbeth, Walsall is open from 8am to 8pm every day of the year. You don't need an appointment to see a doctor or a nurse. Call 01922 858550.

Walsall's NHS Dental Access Centre will try to see emergencies as soon as possible. On week-days, call 01922 858542 and at weekends or Bank Holidays, call 07976 246404.

Operating hours may vary.

Make a resolution to stop smoking, get fitter or lose weight. The Health Trainers team at Walsall Community Health will work one to one with you to achieve your goal for 2011.

Call them on 01922 444044.

If you are cooking roast turkey or chicken for Christmas Lunch:

- First make sure the bird is properly de-frosted - allow two hours per pound.
- If you are serving stuffing, cook it separately not inside the bird.
- Cook your bird thoroughly. To check pierce the thickest part with a knife or carving fork - if there's any pinkness or blood in the juices, it needs longer in the oven.

Call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 for free confidential health advice round the clock every day of the year.

Our local A&E is at the Manor Hospital, Moat Road, Walsall, telephone 01922 721172.

Please keep A&E for emergencies only - for example chest pains, head injuries, suspected broken bones and heavy blood loss.

If you need GP help outside normal hours, call your GP surgery and follow the recorded advice.

Walsall's out-of-hours service is for medical issues too urgent to wait until your own GP practice is next open.

You will be given advice over the phone and, if needed, arrangements will be made for you to be seen.